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DISCOVERING ORIENTATION BETWEEN THEORY AND NARRATIVE

By

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Thesis

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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Discovering Orientation between Theory and Narrative

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Through the concept of orientation, this essay attempts to establish a philosophical account of the structure of our daily lives. By examining Kant's notion of orientation and Heidegger's response to Kant, I highlight the importance of the fact that orientation comes from the world, not simply from our ability to determine our position in the world by means of a coordinate system. Consequently, I argue, the concrete instantiation of a life given in a narrative can supplement the structure that the theoretical framework of justice, which establishes the principles guiding the institutions of our society, claims to leave undetermined. This texture fills the space of justice and culture with tangible things and practices that make up our daily life. The novel *America America* is used as a diagnostic tool to illuminate the forces and opportunities found in our culture that need to be either recognized and avoided, or discovered, revealed, and spoken for. I suggest that instrumental reason and the attainment of mere pleasure, as cultural forces guiding our practices, fail to provide a tenable answer to the question of the good life and that they should be avoided when we are considering the ultimate *how* and *what* of the practices that make up the structure of our lives. In response to the failure of instrumental reason, I propose a deepening of our practices by way of familiarity (through closeness) and accomplishment (through engagement) with the things that are integral to practices such as making maple syrup and preparing a meal.

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## *Discovering Orientation between Theory and Narrative*

### Introduction

The concept of orientation needs to be understood relative to a specific domain. If I were the captain of a ship in the fifteenth century and spoke of orientation, I would be speaking of the ability to navigate from shore to shore over the expansive sea. Here the stars could be used as a means of orientation. By fixing one's heading relative to a given star, the celestial mark can act as a guide to fulfill the need for orientation. Without this guide the captain's efforts to get from one location to another would, perhaps, be arbitrary or built upon superstition. The captain's efforts would not make sense, and we could only blame chance for any success that came from them. The means of orientation for sea captains have changed with the advent of portable and accurate clocks, sonar, radar, computing, and satellite technology, but the concept of orientation (in this domain) has remained the same: the captain must have some guide such that his or her efforts make sense or add up with respect to the task of navigating from one place to another.<sup>1</sup>

By beginning with this navigational notion of orientation, I hope to move into the project at hand. I want to ask: (1) Can the notion of orientation be applied to our lives with the hope that we can find some type of guide to help steer us towards whatever it may mean to live a good life? To answer this question we would have to figure out where we are (our current cultural/social predicament) and where we should be (some general notion of the good-life). And, in order to get from one to the other, we have to find a guide such that we can navigate our way. (2) Can the notion of orientation be

applied to the choices we make in our ordinary lives? This is the question that will help us determine the content of the domain or boundaries within which the notion of orientation to the good life can be applied. (3) Is there an inconspicuous reality that *should* come into relief out of the background of all possible realities in such a way that an orientation to it would be a large part of what it means to live a good life? (4) Is it possible to extract principles from actual lives so that these principles could act as a guide to help us understand and be oriented to the good life? (5) Is the pursuit of the good life something that can be or should be understood in terms of orientation?

I will begin, in Chapter One, by analyzing different conceptions of orientation with the hope of finding one that is applicable to the domain I am interested in. With this concept in hand, I will proceed to review how John Rawls' theory of political justice helps answer the questions I am asking but remains an insufficient answer. Next, I will analyze Charles Taylor's notion of distinct and particular frameworks that he claims acts as the guide needed for individuals to have orientation in their lives.

Chapter Two will address the notion of finding orientation between theory and narrative. I will attempt to propose an original way in which orientation within our ordinary lives may be found. Orientation, I will argue, can be found when a political theory like Rawls' is supplemented with narratives that (1) act as a diagnostic tool in that they can bring into relief, in a concrete way, the content of the forces in our culture that structure our lives, and (2) can speak for *good* ways of life that have as one of their boundaries (implicitly or explicitly) the principles of justice, but go beyond these principles in terms of the content they express about the possible ways in which we can live.

I want to turn to narratives in the hope of finding people who can speak of ways of life that are rich and meaningful. I turn away from theory and towards narratives because the mode in which a rich and meaningful life is to be presented requires the expansive looseness of a narrative - the room to speak for something - and theoretical writing doesn't afford this space.

Other disciplines in the humanities and social sciences have begun focusing on narrative in a whole array of different ways. Since the 1970's movement, now called the "narrative turn," historians, sociologists, linguists, political scientists, psychologists, and others have begun to incorporate narratives into their studies either as the object of their investigation or as a way to organize what is being studied.<sup>2</sup> For example, in the field of psychoanalysis, psychoanalysts "began inquiring whether the object of analysis was not so much archaeologically to reconstruct a life as it was to help the patient construct a more contradiction-free and generative narrative of it."<sup>3</sup> Instead of digging up past trauma and simply revealing it to the patient, the field of psychoanalysis became interested in the entire context within which the trauma affected a patient's life. What constituted the context (past, present, and future) could be understood as a narrative, and analysts began attempting to assist patients in constructing "contradiction-free and generative" narratives of their lives.

Philosophy has become concerned with narrative as well. Philosophers such as Alasdair MacIntyre and Charles Taylor agree that the way in which we conceive of our own lives *should* be a narrative conception. My claim for narratives is less fundamental, but it has narrative playing a crucial role in the way in which orientation in our lives can be discovered. I believe that it is within specific narratives, presented in such a way that

they are compelling enough to be taken up with, that we can acquire guidance towards ways of life that can add depth and meaning to our lives within a political framework that ensures justice.

The novel *America America*, by Ethan Canin, will be the first narrative I work with. I will present a reading of this novel as if it were a diagnosis for several of the problems within our culture. Narratives such as *America America* can be helpful in diagnosing the problems of society, but they are also capable of revealing orienting forces within society. Attempting to combine the virtues of narrative with the way importance or significance is incorporated into our lives can function to supplement a political theory of justice in philosophy's attempt to attend to all aspects of our lives. This, I will argue, is the way to orientation.

The structure of a narrative can be related to the time-elapsed events or to the trajectory of a life. We start somewhere, something happens, and we come to some conclusion. All events walk this line; all lives are lived this way. The narratives that I will investigate in this essay do exactly this while at the same time they are embedded in the culture that I am philosophizing from. This combination makes the structure and the content of narratives relevant to the patterns and content of our lives. I have chosen narratives that are fictional as well as reports of actual events. Both fictional and non-fictional narratives can serve as the concrete content from which the discussion of the good life can draw.

Henry James, in discussing the art of fiction, writes that "The only reason for the existence of a novel is that it does attempt to represent life."<sup>4</sup> He says that the "novel is history" and only differs from history in the manner of collecting and the type of



evidence used.<sup>5</sup> Arguing against the free flight of a writer's fancy, James scorns the attitude that an author "can give his narrative any turn the reader may like best."<sup>6</sup> He says, "Such a betrayal of a sacred office seems to me, I confess, a terrible crime...It implies that the novelist is less occupied in looking for the truth (the truth, of course I mean, that he assumes, the premises that we must grant him, whatever they may be), than the historian, and in doing so it deprives him at a stroke of all his standing-room."<sup>7</sup> The type of truth that James seems to be speaking of is one that resonates with the author in the most important way. It is not a truth that simply serves as the background for a thrill ride through a literary world or the type of truth that is, without purpose, squeezed out of some logical mechanism. Rather, it is an important truth that has been extracted from experience and compels the author to center a text on it and do her best to serve, defend, explicate, articulate, and explore it. Similarly in philosophy, it is the type of truth that serves as the impulse for arguments and examples *for something*; in contrast to arguing because it is merely possible to argue.

I will use Charles Taylor's *The Ethics of Authenticity* to help articulate the problems presented in *America America*. Also, I will attempt to salvage an orienting force which the novel presents as having significance in our lives. I will be guided in my explanation of what an orienting force is by Martin Heidegger's essay "Art and Space."

Chapter three will attempt to respond to the disorientation that partially describes the main character at the end of *America America* and the disorientation that can be seen as a general malaise of our culture. Here the explanation of what an orientating force does is set up by two essays of Heidegger's, "The Thing" and "Building Dwelling Thinking." As we will see, an *explanation* of the orienting force isn't enough to establish

the power of things behind the force; someone speaking for the thing providing orientation is required for the force or power of the thing to become evident. To do this I will turn to two narratives in which specific things and practices are spoken for. The first narrative will suggest a specific orienting force Corey can incorporate into his life. The second narrative will suggest a practice that almost anyone can take up with.

Throughout this chapter I will lay out the general structure of the argument, without veering off into abstraction, for orienting ourselves in our lives. Based on this structure I will comment on how this form of orientation-supplying-meaning-and-fulfillment fits into the just society and how it offers a way to personal fulfillment that is an alternative to particular frameworks.

## **Chapter One**

### ***Embedding the Question of Orientation: Orientation, Justice, and Particular Frameworks***

When we speak of orientation we must specify the domain within which one seeks orientation to ensure that we are not speaking past one another. If I begin speaking of orientation and you think that I am discussing the concept in relation to navigating a ship, but I am really discussing it in relation to our daily lives, we would find ourselves in a confused muddle. The goal of this section is to trace part of the history of two different philosophers dealing with the concept of orientation in hopes of finding an appropriate conception of it to apply to individuals in daily life. My claim is that it is not obvious how one orients oneself in life. What are we to orient ourselves to? The vague notion of the good or the good life is not helpful until it has been fleshed out. I am not going to start off by characterizing the good life and then go on to describe how to we steer ourselves to it; rather, I am going to begin by investigating the *way* in which we are capable of steering ourselves, in hopes of finding an appropriate one (Section One), then I am going to set up the boundaries within which this orienting can take place (Section Two), and, finally, I am going to contrast the model I have begun to draw with Charles Taylor's notion of particular orientations applied to individuals and their lives (Section Three). All of this falls under the heading of embedding the question of orientation.

#### **Section One. *Orientation in Space: From Kant to Heidegger***

I begin my discussion of orientation with the notion of orientation in space. I begin here because space is the most basic of "places" within which individuals can be

oriented. Analyzing different conceptions of orientation in space will also help lead us to an appropriate understanding of what daily life is embedded in. An appropriate understanding of space combined with an adequate understanding of orientation in it, is the most basic step in discovering orientation within our daily lives and as such will serve as the foundation for any conception of orientation. Whether or not this notion of orientation will be recommended for the way in which individuals should be oriented in their daily lives has not been decided. What is clear is that individuals must be oriented within space to simply move about intelligently; therefore, this is where I will begin.

In Immanuel Kant's essay "What does it mean to orient oneself in thinking?" we are presented with a conception of how one orients oneself in space.<sup>8</sup> Kant suggests that to orient "oneself in any given space [is to orient oneself] mathematically."<sup>9</sup> Kant gives the following two examples to illustrate this type of orientation:

In the dark I orient myself in a room that is familiar to me if I can take hold of even one single object whose position I remember. But it is plain that nothing helps me here except the faculty for determining position according to a subjective ground of differentiation: for I do not see at all the objects whose place I am to find; and if someone as a joke had moved all the objects around so that what was previously on the right was now on the left, I would be quite unable to find anything in a room whose walls were otherwise wholly identical. But I can soon orient myself through the mere feeling of a difference between my two sides, the right and left. That is just what happens if I am to walk and take the correct turns on streets otherwise familiar to me when I cannot right now distinguish any of the houses.<sup>10</sup>

In Kant's first example, it seems as if he is saying that if I entered a familiar room with the lights off and I was spun around such that I didn't know my original location all I needed to do for orientation would be to stumble into a piece of furniture I recognized by memory (determine which piece it is by feeling it out I suppose) and then allow my ability to feel a difference between left and right, a "faculty implanted by nature [and] made habitual through frequent practice," to guide me through the rest of the room, since I know the general layout of the room (or its contents) from memory.<sup>11</sup> His main claim is that without the feeling that arises within us that differentiates left from right, we could locate and recognize a piece of familiar furniture in the room, but then we would not be capable of knowing which direction to move to get to the next piece of furniture that, from memory, we know is some distance from this original piece. We would be helpless at that point without the feeling because nothing in the world indicates left or right; we supply that information. Our subjective perspective adds directionality to the world. Consider a ball spinning freely in space. Any objective view, any view that did not posit a specific perceiver, could not qualify the direction of the spin as clockwise or counter clockwise. Only in relation to a subjective observer do we add this directionality to the world. Kant's conception of orientation concludes that orientation within any given space requires the ability to locate a recognizable position and then follow or listen to the feeling that arises within us that allows us to differentiate left from right.

But, in his analysis, Kant emphasizes only the latter aspect of orientation, the feeling of differentiating left from right, as being fundamental or most constitutive of discovering orientation. He gives this faculty of differentiation more credence with respect to orientation than he does our ability to locate our position or have a position at

all. In essence, he is calling orientation the order of the world as perceived by any given subject in any given space. His second example makes his priorities a little clearer. If you knew you walked four blocks north and two blocks east from your house, but happened to look around you and realized nothing looked familiar, you need not be disoriented. As long as you knew your position (4 blocks N, 2 blocks E of house) then, when you came to the unfamiliar intersection that you knew you needed to turn south onto, you would not have lost orientation. But in Kant's construal he only states emphatically that what is required here is "the mere feeling of a difference between my two sides," and the idea of position has been entirely abstracted from any actual position this walker might have. Again, in his construal of orientation he is emphasizing our ability to direct ourselves within any given space and not emphasizing our ability to recognize our position in it. This sense of orientation does not account for much. At best it seems to protect us from some barely fathomable, complete disorientation that would make knowing how to proceed in the world impossible. But even this seemingly contentless notion of orientation requires at least some concrete aspect of the world to get off the ground.

Kant doesn't seem to appropriately account for our ability to 'locate' ourselves in space, or determine our position. Martin Heidegger complains about Kant's construal of orientation stating, "That I am already in a world is no less constitutive for the possibility of orientation than is the feeling for right and left."<sup>12</sup> This suggests that location and directionality are either equally constitutive, or that recognizing the fact that "I am already in a world" is more constitutive. For Heidegger, directionality is a product of being-in-the-world: directionality is a mode of existence. In response to Kant he writes,

“The subject with a ‘mere feeling’ of this difference [between left and right] is a construct posited in disregard of the state that is truly constitutive for any subject – namely, that whenever [a subject] has such a ‘mere feeling’, it is in a world already *and must be* in it to be able to orient itself at all.”<sup>13</sup> What is most constitutive with respect to orientation then is this notion of being-in-the-world. Even Kant, in his construal of orientation cannot explain orientation without hinting at this fact. But his analysis does not adequately emphasize its importance as I have noted above. Heidegger’s notion of orienting oneself from the standpoint of being-in-the-world deals more coherently and substantially with the concept of orientation than Kant’s notion of “orienting oneself in any given space,” which ultimately means orienting oneself in an abstract, non-actual space.

What Kant provides for us is an abstract understanding of orientation. “Any space” refers to an abstract, universal understanding of space that would be appropriate for mathematical or scientific inquiry (as he notes). And, although this conception of orientation (along with proper emphasis given to our ability to locate our position with respect to our destination) would be successful if employed in situations that required abstract orientation, our success would be measured only by our ability to maneuver from one abstract point to another. The problem with this is that we never live entirely in abstract space. Even our discussion of orientation with respect to abstract space needs to be grounded, for it to be coherent, by a piece of concrete reality. In Kant’s case it is the piece of furniture that we first bump into. This piece of concrete reality gives us our position. But Kant devalues this part of the analysis because he is taking as given the notion of abstract or empty space and building his argument from that foundation. From

the assumption of empty space it makes sense to deduce the need for a subjective understanding of imposed orientation. But, once we realize that the analysis always requires a concrete context, our argument must be re-assessed. What gets lost in Kant's account is recovered in Heidegger's. Heidegger rejects Kant's abstract notion of orientation and grounds the analysis of orientation in a way that brings our context to the fore.

Abstract thought derives from the things and contexts we find ourselves in. These things and contexts are not abstract; they are the concrete entities that our lives are organized around and with. Heidegger wants to avoid an abstract notion of space (which in places he calls physical-technological or world space) and wants to discuss orientation in the space that we actually encounter in the world. The difference between Kant's notion of space and Heidegger's notion of space can be understood as the difference between a scientific (mathematical) understanding of space and a phenomenological understanding of space. Kant's notion should not be thrown away and replaced by Heidegger's: the different methods of analysis render two different conceptions of orientation that apply to two different domains of inquiry. Since our concern is with daily life and how one orients oneself in daily living, we are concerned with the context within which such happenings take place: this is not the abstract realm of mathematical contemplation. We do not come to the world and divide it into three dimensions, map a coordinate system on to it, layering it with an abstraction that distances us from it, *and then* attempt to orient ourselves to it. Or, at least, our richest and deepest connections to the world and people do not happen when we operate this way. When we incorporate technology into our lives we actually do begin to exist in both abstract and concrete



space. The sense in which I am using the term ‘technology’ is the Borgmannian notion of a device that procures a commodity.<sup>14</sup> A device is a piece of technology whose internal workings or presence in our lives is hidden from us visually and nearly inaccessible in our understanding and interactions if exposed. What the device procures for us is a commodity that delivers pleasure or a thing of necessity. In a world stripped bare of technology we would be forced to live and engage directly with the world as it is to get what we needed or wanted out of it. As we incorporate technology in our lives that removes us from this engagement, the space we exist in becomes a layered space on top of, or an abstracted space above, concrete space. The difference can be articulated by considering a technological device that does approximate abstract space and extracts us from the landmarks and particularities of concrete space.

Consider the global positioning system (GPS) devices that are now employed in automobiles. Instead of paying attention to the physical landmarks outside of the vehicle, the driver orients herself using a screen that updates itself continuously while the car moves towards its destination. One’s powers of observation and interpretation are replaced with a GPS output-solution to whatever destination is requested. Our participation is not with the signs and landscapes we can see through the windshield. Now we are told where to turn and when to turn, and it only requires lining up the command with what actually exists, or how the road actually turns. Like the Kantian subject, orientation emanates from the GPS device. The difficulty with accepting this type of orientation as the one that should be incorporated into our lives is that it does not answer the call of orientation. To be oriented is to be oriented *to something*. When we consider the Kantian notion of orientation or the accepted cultural instantiation of

orientation delivered by the GPS device, this *something* becomes arbitrary: I am oriented when I know where I am relative to *any* other given point. But just because one has her bearings, does not mean she is oriented. To claim that one is oriented we must work out what we should be oriented to and how we are to be oriented to it. Kant attempts to answer the second part of this question. Contemporary culture claims to leave it open to the individual without recognizing the strong forces that influence the individual to actually be oriented in a specific direction. Heidegger attempts to answer the first part of the question which, in turn, deduces an answer for the second part. From him we shall take our cue.

In the example of the GPS, concrete space has not disappeared. It has become the backdrop onto which abstract, technological space projects itself. The GPS screen flattens space and projects what it determines to be important for the driver to pay attention to. Here we begin to lose the depth of reality. We begin to strip our lives of what reality actually presents to us behind technology, and we lose what Heidegger calls our life's "involvement-character."<sup>15</sup> From this point I believe that we can begin to draw the moral reasons for demanding a concrete assessment of space in our hopes of discovering orientation in which we can live a rich, "involved" life in relation to things of concern, rather than accepting an abstract notion of space in which orientation is an arbitrary matter.

Let us call this move away from the abstract notion of orientation *Heidegger's call for concreteness*. Space and what we should be oriented to in space is discussed in his essays: "Art and Space," "The Thing," and "Building Dwelling Thinking." In each essay Heidegger suggests the move away from the "physically-technologically projected

space” to a less abstract, more appropriate understanding of space and orientation that treats distances (remote or close) and directionality (left, right, up, down, etc.) as qualities, not of measurable, quantifiable nature, but as the way in which we as thinking subjects bring things close to or near to us in our dealings.<sup>16</sup> As I type, what is closest to me are the black letters that appear on the screen and their relationship to the train of thought I am working on. This distance is determined by what I am focused on and what is currently of most importance to me, and what I am currently working on or engaged with; it by no means is what is physically closest to me. To determine what is physically-technologically closest to me, one must determine my position (which in itself is not simple: am I my body or a part of my body or just a current perception of my position?) and then begin to measure out from that point listing everything that is encountered. Between ‘me’ and the screen one would encounter the air that brushes against my face, my clothes, the seat that I rest on, and my hands on the key board. There would be nothing in that measurement that would single out what it is that we *should* be orienting ourselves to: we would just be given a list of facts for which some other guide would have to be employed to make a decision. And this is our concern. What guides us to bring one thing and not another close to us when we discover the different possible ways in which our attention, work, and involvement can be employed? We can say that Heidegger has established the notion of orientation we would like to adopt for how we orient ourselves in our daily lives, but the content of what we orient ourselves to is missing.

To this we will return. But first we must work out the domain within which orientation in our daily lives should be placed. We have begun to answer this by

choosing concrete space over abstract and technological space and adding to it the notions of closeness and involvement that relate to the possible ways in which an individual can be engrossed. From this point orientation can be understood as a way in which we guide our decisions about what we focus our concern and involvement on and how we do so. Before we can discuss this, though, we must secure something that is implicit in and precedes the discussion of the good life.

**Section Two.** *Justice: The horizon for ways of living*

Before we attempt to deploy the concept of orientation that we have begun to establish, we must set up the boundaries within which we are to deploy it. So far we have limited it to concrete space. What this implies is that any theorizing we do in relation to how our daily lives should be structured must be capable of impacting how we actually live our lives. To clarify this point, consider how when reading the Frankfurt School philosophers, we feel that they have an interest in daily living to the extent that they critique the current political structure in hopes of improving it for the sake of the people, but all we get is a critique of the current instantiations of oppression.<sup>17</sup> What is lacking is the positive side of a negative analysis or critique. Once the current situation has been readily critiqued, what are we to do? The critical theorists don't provide an answer here. At times it seems as though the only thing we can do is endlessly critique the situation we find ourselves in. And, although this may be prudent and a path towards truth, it misses the fact that we are all engaged in daily living – even critical theorists. They must participate in that which they are critiquing in a way that provides sustenance to survive, and they must attempt to build a good life. Instead of ignoring this feature of our lives

we must philosophize about it. Therefore, our investigations cannot be merely a critique, and they must relate to the concrete ways of life that are possible for us.

But the critical theorists are right to critique the political structures that over and over again are built upon oppressive ways of thinking or when in the hands of irresponsible individuals lead to corrupt nations. For our concerns, the political realm is of crucial concern because it lays out the horizons for the permissible ways of life for individuals. I believe the next most basic realm (after space) in which daily life is, and should be, embedded in is the political realm.

Some may object here and suggest that requiring an individual to recognize the political structure that does or can rule over one's choices only impinges upon the possibility for the good life. But I disagree. We should opt to embrace a political structure instead of rejecting it in hopes of independently securing for ourselves freedom for the good life. We should do so for two very different reasons. The first comes from Aristotle. Aristotle argues that, by nature, we are social creatures.<sup>18</sup> In order to experience or engage in certain activities that offer an individual a sense of happiness or accomplishment or fulfillment, the social realm must exist. In other words, if a human is deprived of the condition of togetherness or the sense of participation that can be found in a social setting, the upper bound for the possibility of happiness or fulfillment that one could achieve would be lower than for one who was afforded such a setting. The second reason can be understood in terms of security and can be understood in two senses. In the negative sense, ways of life in society are considered acceptable up to the extent that they don't infringe upon the security of others, where security refers to bodily integrity and inalienable personal freedoms and rights. In the positive sense, an abstract or

metaphorical space has been cleared within which I am permitted to engage in a way of life. Here, law and the coercive power of the government would uphold these agreed upon or stipulated boundaries. This is not so much a physical space as it is a space of possibility limited by the conditions put forth by the political realm.

Before sketching the landscape of the political realm, I must follow up the previous discussion with an additional note. I have an affinity for those who believe that we are required to reject the impositions and boundaries that have been placed upon individuals simply because they are involuntarily born into a given society governed by a certain politic. A lot of the talk of the “good life” is found in the writings of those who reject society and attempt to find their own way or live off the land. In these cases I think the spirit of rejection is warranted, but the expression of it is misguided. Here I am thinking of the American transcendentalists, the rise of the Hippies in 1960’s America, and the Amish communities still present in America. The impulse behind the ways of life supported by these ways of thought need not reject society in its entirety. One’s relationship with nature, one’s care-free, pacifist concerns, or one’s rejection of modern amenities all have elements that should be incorporated into the possible ways of life *found in society*. The rejection of society found in similar movements should be redirected in a way that doesn’t reject social structure in its entirety, but, rather, enters into discourse with society in the hopes that society will respond to the ways of life and values expressed. But for the second reason stated above there should be limits to what activities are permissible.

As a way into a discussion of the political realm let us consider what permissible might mean. This notion of *permissible* should not be understood with parental

connotations. The limits and boundaries of what is permissible in society come from a reasonable person rationally considering their situation and making a choice about which activities are in fact compatible with the situation: one isn't commanded to do something, but would agree to doing so if he or she could see the issue clearly.

One way of approaching this question of determining the boundaries established by the political realm is to come to terms with them in ideal theory. If one were to do this, they would be creating the target that we should strive for in terms of the way in which our social institutions function. In a sense, this theory could be part of what we orient ourselves to in the question concerning orientation in our daily lives: it will set up the boundaries within which our lives are embedded, and, in a democracy, put forth an activity that is part of ensuring the possibility of the good life: political participation.

John Rawls, in *Justice as Fairness*, attempts to set these boundaries by laying out the principles that would ensure justice in a democracy of free and equal citizens.<sup>19</sup>

Following Kant, he writes:

The idea is that it belongs to reason and reflection (both theoretical and practical) to orient us in the (conceptual) space, say, of all possible ends, individual and associational, political and social. Political philosophy, as a work of reason, does this by specifying principles to identify reasonable and rational ends of those various kinds, and by showing how those ends can cohere within a well-articulated conception of a just and reasonable society. Such a conception may offer a unified framework within which proposed answers to divisive questions can be made consistent and the insights gained from different kinds of cases can be brought to bear on one another and extended to other cases.<sup>20</sup>

Rawls' project, unlike ours, has committed itself to the domain of the political. It doesn't ignore the realm of everyday living, and it doesn't treat it as inferior. Rawls' project, in a sense, leaves the question of the structure and content of daily life open. Importantly, what Rawls attempts to do is secure the possibility of a good life for all. His theory is guided, not by describing or conceptualizing about the nature and content of the good life, but, rather, by the requirement that all should be able to aim at such a target. In terms of priority, Rawls describes the political realm as follows:

...just institutions and the political virtues would serve no purpose - would have no point - unless those institutions and virtues not only permitted but also sustained conceptions of the good...that citizens can affirm as worth of their full allegiance. A conception of political justice must contain within itself sufficient space, as it were, for ways of life that can gain devoted support. If it cannot do this, that conception will lack support and be unstable. In a phrase, the just draws the limit, the good shows the point.<sup>21</sup>

The need for a limit is the same as saying the need for justice or the need to have society set up in such a way that it allows everyone to at least have an equal opportunity to aim at and move towards the good life. If the hindrances upon movement towards all ways of life that can aim at some good arise from the basic structure of the political or social institutions that one is embedded in, then political justice, although it may have been secured, is pointless. From another angle, if a collection of peoples' lives are good at the expense of another group of people, justice has not yet been secured.

But more importantly, the notion of justice as fairness is a political conception of justice. Rawls' theory comes up with principles of justice that are effective when applied



to the choice between different conceptions of political regimes or basic structures or systems of government. What this means is that when we follow Rawls as a guide and consider “the fundamental idea of society as a fair system of social cooperation” consisting of free and equal citizens with respect to their political status, we can then consider different systems of government and adopt one that functions in such a way that it can follow the principles of justice deduced from this conception of society.<sup>22</sup> These principles in turn become the guide for the institutions that constitute the structure of our society. The principles do not necessarily govern all of our actions; we aren’t required to apply the political conception of justice to every aspect of our lives, but our ways of life are most certainly limited by this background feature.

What this means is that our notions of the good, all notions of the good, are subordinated to the notion of justice. This brings us to the following question: Why is Rawls proposing what he calls a “free-standing” theory of justice that applies to the political realm instead of proposing a moral theory that is comprehensive enough to cover both the political conception of justice *and* the notion of the good that governs, not only the institutions of society, but the lives that individuals lead?

In response to this, Rawls writes “that, given the fact of reasonable pluralism, a well-ordered society in which all its members accept the same comprehensive doctrine is impossible.”<sup>23</sup> Reasonable pluralism, continues Rawls, “is the fact that a diversity of reasonable comprehensive doctrines is a permanent feature of a democratic society.”<sup>24</sup> Comprehensive doctrines are what make conceptions of the good coherent and are usually philosophical or theological doctrines. Rawls is suggesting that within society different conceptions of the good can exist if they are reasonable and recognize the

restrictions imposed by and the role required of individuals cooperating within society (implicitly, the rules of justice as fairness). Having said that, Rawls doesn't want to drop another comprehensive doctrine in the bucket; he wants to look at the fundamental concept of democratic society and deduce the principles that can help create and maintain a fair and cooperate society. Rawls, by focusing on the political realm, helps set up the background within which conceptions of the good life (made coherent by comprehensive doctrines) frame individuals' lives, but he doesn't offer a sufficient answer to the character of and orientation in daily life. This is not so much a fault as it is a matter of scope. Rawls' theory provides an essential, necessary part of the answer to our investigation. And, Rawls offers us a way into the question of daily life by laying out a basic condition for it and suggesting a way to proceed to it. What is of concern is how he leaves the question of the good life open.

Thinking that it is possible to leave a space open in society or culture for individuals to fill with "a plan of life in the light of which they schedule their more important endeavors and allocate their various resources so as rationally to pursue their conceptions of the good over a complete life" is perhaps *too* ideal.<sup>25</sup> That which structures and gives content to our daily lives goes beyond a just political system because there are other issues related to our lives that are strongly conducive to a particular way of life, and they fail to be debated, public, and open to effective criticism. When we put the good life in the hands of these inducements, the defensive attitude of "I can do whatever I want" is actually reinforced by what Rawls proposes, even though Rawls would respond by saying that it is not in your best interest to do what you think you have freely chosen. And although some individuals may be courageous and disciplined

enough to proceed with the rational pursuit of a commendable notion of the good life, the currents and forces of contemporary culture instantiated by the appeal of consumerism, the power of technology, and people's lack of substantial notions of the good life are too great, or too seductive, or too disorienting to overcome by most.

Orientation to the good life at the level of the individual is given a more substantial treatment in the work of Charles Taylor. He suggests that one discovers, in the process of coming to terms with one's identity, a particular framework that represents answers to important evaluative questions about how one's life is led. This notion corresponds to what Rawls calls a comprehensive doctrine. Taylor attempts to explicate the conditions for the possibility of the good life (through the notion of identity as a moral concept) by examining the requirements needed for an individual to have a meaningful, rich life. I will now consider this approach to see how the notion of particular frameworks fits into the domain within which we are seeking orientation.

### **Section Three.** *Particular Frameworks*

The essay in which Kant discusses orientation begins by analyzing how one is oriented in space. The essay goes on to discuss how one can be oriented in both theoretical and practical thinking. The realm in which Kant discusses the employment of practical reason can be understood as moral space. In Kant's moral space we are to follow, and be oriented by, the moral law "which is of itself apodictically certain."<sup>26</sup> Although this will steer us correctly, Kant suggests it doesn't lay out the landscape in full. Reason supplies us with the '*what*' to do (follow the moral law), but only through "rational belief or faith" does the full picture of *why* we do so come into resolution.<sup>27</sup>

This is the subjective element needed to provide orientation in moral space. Just as in his analysis of orientation in physical space, in moral space we are guided by a subjective feeling. This feeling is not any random feeling or flash of enthusiasm. The feeling that provides orientation and a rational belief beyond that which one can know is a feeling that leads to a concept that can satisfy the “need of reason.”<sup>28</sup> Describing this feeling Kant writes: “Reason does not feel; it has insight into its lack and through the drive for cognition it effects the feeling of a need. It is the same way with moral feeling, which does not cause any moral law, for this arises wholly from reason; rather, it is caused or effected by moral laws, hence by reason, because the active yet free will needs determinate grounds.”<sup>29</sup>

Again, we find ourselves in an abstract realm where reason lays out the landscape. From the short paragraph above we can imagine that the moral law has no connection to any specific culture, is not bound to any actual space or time, and it can apply to any person in any place at any time. In terms of scope this is an amazing feat of generality. In terms of depth and richness in what it prescribes it is desolate and thin. Kant’s analysis concludes by positing an intelligent creator of the world “in order to give objective reality to the concept of the highest good” in the hope that this will prevent his moral philosophy from being construed as idealism.<sup>30</sup> (This is also what fulfills the felt need of reason.) The moral law he prescribes is not justified by God; rather, God fills out the landscape of the moral space entailed by the realm, depicted by reason, in which the drama of life is played out. By this point, Kant’s analysis of moral space has risen above physical space and rests somewhere over it and is only in touch with it through its trappings. The abstract realm created by reason doesn’t admit the personal complexities

of an individual, the particular life defined by one's context, or one's emotions and goals. For Kant these are to be bracketed and our practical action should conform to the universal law, otherwise it is deviant. The problem with this is that it doesn't account for the possibility of happiness in our earthly lives. The problem of "what we should do," or attending to the broader sense of morality that includes what things are worth doing and the content of the good life, requires an answer that suggests some fulfillment *within* those actual lives. By using the notion of "fulfillment" I am adding the sense of fulfillment that can be understood as happiness. It has more than the one dimension of reason. There is an emotional, contextual, and a dimension of particularity that gives happiness its content.

In the same way that Heidegger is the counterpoint to Kant's understanding of physical space, Charles Taylor can be understood as Kant's counterpoint to moral space. Taylor suggests a move to concreteness in how moral space is construed. In doing so he attends to the multidimensional nature of what it means to be an individual pursuing happiness, fulfillment, and meaning. He begins discussing orientation by way of analogy. First he describes the need for orientation in physical space and then links that to moral space:

Our orientation in space is not the answer to a factitious, dispensable issue. We couldn't conceive of a human life form where one day people came to reflect that, since they were spatial beings, they ought after all to develop a sense of up and down, right and left, and find landmarks which would enable them to get around —reflections which might be disputed by others. We can't conceive of a form in which this question is not always already there, demanding an answer. We can't

distance ourselves from the issue of spatial orientation or fail to stumble upon it...or repudiate it.<sup>31</sup>

This excerpt is from an argument in which Taylor is denying the possibility that we could exist somehow without an orientation in space. He then uses this to serve his concern about orientation in the realm of moral space. ‘Moral space,’ as described by Taylor, refers to “a space in which questions arise about what is good or bad, what is worth doing and what not, what has meaning and importance for you and what is trivial and secondary.”<sup>32</sup> Compared to Kant, Taylor’s construal of moral space is broader and richer. We are offered more dimensions to be engaged morally in the world than simply fulfilling some duty posited by an abstract law. He offers us a notion of what it may mean to live a good life that goes beyond meeting an obligation. This in itself helps satisfy our intuition that a good life is in some way earthly and rewarded as having a sense of positive feelings, happiness, fulfillment, and meaning - all of which are part of the concept of joy.

Taylor claims that the demand for orientation in moral space, like that of physical space, is also “always and already there.” Within this moral space one is oriented by knowing where one stands with respect to the questions that arise there, and this in turn establishes one’s identity. Taylor writes that our identity is defined through “an understanding of what is of crucial importance to us.”<sup>33</sup> An identity, or a coherent collection of answers to the questions that arise in moral space, make up what Taylor calls a framework.

These frameworks pertain to groups of individuals by means of their upbringing. Taylor discusses the source of frameworks as coming from interlocutor or language

communities which produce individuals with the capacity to have frameworks at all. The necessity for a language and language partners such that one can be confronted by and come up with answers to the questions that arise in concrete moral space requires learning a language, which in turn requires language partners. And, any deviation from the frameworks that are held by an individual's original language partners is always a deviation *from* the original, never a conquering of it. Defining oneself always involves, in part, a person's ability to show his or her tie to some language-forming community. Taylor states that an individual can only define himself by "his stand on moral and spiritual matters...[and] some reference to a defining community."<sup>34</sup> Both of these elements make up a person's framework or identity.

Frameworks function in the following way. First, imagine a framework from the past. Taylor describes the honor ethic held by citizens and soldiers. Here an individual would be born into a certain community where he or she would learn the language which would make it possible to answer in evaluative language about where he or she stands on issues of importance. In the framework of the honor ethic, statements such as "Never retreat in battle" or "Do not question the King" may have been lived by. These statements in relation to their referents would have helped established the horizon of meaning for an individual by being what Taylor calls strong evaluations or qualitative distinctions. To clarify this, the statements can be translated to read "It is bad to retreat in battle" or "It is wrong to question the King". These statements come as part of the frameworks that are inherited from the communities these individuals are born into. Their authenticity or justification is not found in an analysis of the principles or the

foundations upon which they rest. Rather, they are found by actually importing a sense of meaning into the individual's life.

From this we can begin to get the complete picture of a person's life and the meaning that can be attached to it. If one was born into a culture that followed the honor ethic and adopted it himself, his life would be meaningful such that he had the opportunity to engage in the activities that could fulfill commands similar to one's listed above and that he fulfilled them successfully. Not having the opportunity to engage in battle or service to the King (when the meaning of life is to do exactly that) could render one's life unfulfilled. Perhaps worse, having the opportunity to fight or serve and failing at the task could render one's life a failure. (Remember, failure is based upon the strong evaluations found in statements similar to the ones discussed above and outline the framework of an individual's life.)

What is clear from this is that the idea of a framework gives us the content to discuss the notions of a 'fulfilled or unfulfilled' and 'successful or failed' life in a meaningful way. This is part of our concern with respect to orientation: what it means to be oriented in our lives is to be orientated to the possibility of fulfillment. Fulfillment or the sense of being on the path to fulfillment is, in a sense, a result of correct orientation. The idea of correct orientation must be explored further, but first we should decide whether or not to move forward in accepting frameworks as the means by which to find orientation.

We must start at the beginning again to see the difficulties of adopting particular frameworks for our inquiry into orientation. We started off by circumscribing the domain within which orientation was to be sought. First, we found our way to concrete space,



which dispelled the myth that we could live (in the sense of actively participate with the world and the beings and things in it) by means of orientation to an abstract or mathematical space. Second, we made a stipulation. We claimed that we should opt for social engagement if we wanted to secure the richest possibility for the good life. Importantly, we didn't adopt a specific political agenda, but, rather, we adopted a criterion for any instantiation of political power that may come about. This criterion was described as justice as fairness and was taken from Rawls.

These two elements have begun to create the boundaries of the landscape within which we will seek orientation to the good life. Next, we showed that there are concerns about claiming to leave the space for the good life open. Attempting to come up with a principle to follow or a way to flesh out this space, we introduced the concept of moral space. We rejected the abstract notion of moral space as construed by Kant and considered Taylor's more concrete moral frameworks. Now the difficulty with the notion of frameworks, as I see them, is that, although they offer a more concrete construal of moral space than the one offered by Kant, they don't go far enough. First, they stand over and against the circumscribed area established by justice. Our culture does not produce one single framework that is adopted by everyone. Individuals, even when focusing solely on a single nation such as America, come out of a myriad of different language communities that value different things in different ways. Speaking of the different types of frameworks that arise in the modern world Taylor writes, "None forms the horizon of the whole society in the modern West...no framework is shared by everyone."<sup>35</sup> Since this is the case, we must consider the consequences of clashing frameworks. Due to the improbability of different value systems seamlessly overlapping,

conflict will arise. Some of this conflict could be understood as a difference in the understanding of rights. The right to engage in some practices but not others doesn't come out of a framework in the way that Taylor describes it. There is something overarching all frameworks or something similar to all frameworks that helps us determine which practices will be tolerated when a conflict arises. But this has already been determined once we rationally consider our situation as being members of a society that accepts the criterion of justice. The practices that are permissible are the ones that are just. The ones that must be eliminated are the ones that are not just. This will eliminate the possibility for the fulfillment of at least some frameworks that exist in society. It may not eliminate the framework entirely, but it will truncate it or take away from it in such a way that its capacity for acting as the horizon of meaning for an individual or community will be altered. In fact, this draws a more realistic picture of modern society than imagining that our world is made up of a bunch of communities on the path to fulfillment by means of different frameworks. The loss of meaning in peoples' lives that is a signature mark of modernity -one discussed by Taylor- could be attributed, not just to the skepticism about frameworks (an incorrect understanding of identity that Taylor argues against), but to the fact that frameworks aren't sufficient for orientation to the good life in society. Because of this, it seems prudent, for my project, to work from the basis of justice *to* the ways of life that are possible to be oriented to in hopes of seeking fulfillment within the bounds of a just society.

Taylor himself describes the condition where a legitimate framework is in place to offer an individual an orientation to the good life, yet is prevented from doing so by the

values embedded in an unjust society. (By ‘legitimate framework’ I mean one that offers the guidance to, or horizons for, life-fulfillment *and* fits within a just society.)

Someone who sees the fulfillment of life in some form of expressive activity may be far from this fulfillment, but she may nevertheless see herself as striving towards it and approaching it, even though she never fully encompasses what she projects for herself. Of course, in this case, the issue may concern not only her basic stance...but the objective limits of possibility which frame her life. People bent on an artistic career may feel they have it in them to do something significant; or alternatively, they may come to feel one day that they just haven’t got what it takes. Or their despair may spring from a sense that some external limitations stand in the way: that people of their class, or race, or sex, or poverty will never be allowed to develop themselves in the relevant ways. Many women in our day have felt so excluded from careers, which they saw as deeply fulfilling (for a whole host of reasons, to do with recognition as well as with expression and the significant achievements for human welfare that these jobs entailed), by external barriers which had nothing to do with their own authentic desires and attitudes.<sup>36</sup>

It is the concern of justice that legitimate ways of life are not denied to individuals for reasons of gender, race, or economic status.<sup>37</sup> This works in both directions: legitimate ways of life are not to be denied *and* ways of life that take advantage of people through unjust means must be rejected in our contemplation of the good life. Justice must be secured and the possibility for a meaningful life must fit within this “framework of justice,” so that a meaningful life as a framework will slide in place within it. Taylor

fails to recognize how this space for the good life has been set by the framework of justice. The constraints of contemporary culture must be worked out before we can claim that particular frameworks related to individuals fulfill the need for orientation by providing the content and structure of our daily lives.

All of this seems to be saying something very obvious, but it is crucial that it is laid out in this manner such that we approach the question of orientation in the correct way. In the end, I think something like the notion of frameworks will still be a “legitimate moral description,” but because of the need for justice in our investigation into how to gain orientation to the good life, we must bracket the notion of frameworks until we can lay out, in a principled manner, what about them allows them to offer fulfillment or meaning, fit within a just society, and address the constraints of our contemporary culture.<sup>38</sup>

The space in society opened up by justice is where the possibility for the good life will be realized. It is not an empty space however. It has pervasive cultural constraints and opportunities built into it that must be charted and taken responsibility for. In his presentation of particular frameworks, Taylor doesn’t entertain the question of how his frameworks might fit into this space of justice and culture, and this leads us to the concern described in the example above. Even though Taylor makes a move away from the abstract towards the concrete, he doesn’t move far enough away. The details of how the practices that are taken up within certain frameworks that fit in the space opened up by justice are to be reconciled with the constraints found in contemporary culture is the groundwork that needs to be done to build the foundation for the good life.

Instead of approaching the question of the good life by identifying and living up to the particular framework one seems to be affiliated with, we should approach the question by examining the possibilities for practices that can constitute the good life in the concrete. To do this I suggest that we turn away from philosophical or political theorizing and look at narrative. We won't turn our backs on theory; we just need a new source that can provide the content for the practices that can make up the good life while registering the constraints of contemporary culture that inform the landscape of the moral space in which the good life is possible. In turning to narrative, we will be working from the concrete in hopes of finding patterns and implications about the good life or the lack thereof.

## **Chapter Two**

### ***Charting the Space for the Good Life***

#### ***Introduction: Narrative as a Diagnostic Tool***

I have rejected Charles Taylor's notion of particular frameworks because they do not appropriately deal with the pervasive cultural constraints and opportunities in the space opened up by justice for the good life. The next step towards orientation requires a mapping of this cultural space in order to come to terms with the forces and currents found within it. To do this I propose looking at a narrative in its concrete portrayal of a life lived in a fictionalized, but reality-representing, American culture. Of course no depiction of America could be confused with the depiction of a nation that has successfully adopted the criterion of justice, and therefore, in the narrative depicting American life, the space left for the content of the good life cannot stand as an accurate model for the space opened up in ideal theory. But this is all to the better. If we have the hope of living what can be deemed a good life today, we must come to terms with what this means in a nation that is striving for the ideal of justice, not simply an ideal one that has met that goal. That being said, the content of the good life will be subordinate to the principles of justice, but provide an answer to the question of what makes justice worthwhile. Instead of proposing that a particular framework fits into the space opened up by justice (Taylor) or that at least one comprehensive doctrine will fit into this space (Rawls), narrative can present the content required to show that the attempt to live a good life is actually a struggle to find meaning in a culture that is inclined towards cutting out the conditions for the possibility of frameworks, comprehensive doctrines, and ultimately, the good life. Because of this, the philosophical work required to address the

question of the good life must attend to questions that are prior or more fundamental to concepts like particular frameworks and comprehensive doctrines; the work needs to be more concrete.

Narrative, in contrast to theory, has the ability to present us with both the constraints of our culture and that which has the power to orient us. It can be diagnostic as well as orienting. Where a theory is conceptual in structure and shows how elements of the good life are linked together or how a certain form of orientation is coherent (Kant and Rawls), narrative has a time-elapsing structure and is by nature correspondent or resonant to our fears and hopes. The structure of narrative gives it a unique appeal for the inquiry into the good life. Our lives can be said to have a narrative structure or at least require the minimum of the intelligibility of a story to make them hang together as a whole. So a narrative, in this sense, will help us figure out an ultimate structure or method with which we can apply meaning to our lives.

The bulk of Chapter 2 (Sections 1 and 2) will attempt to answer the first part of the question of orientation: *Where are we?* and will be related to the diagnostic function of narrative. The end of Chapter 2 (Section 3) will steer us to the task left for Chapter 3, answering the substantial concern about orientation: *Where should we be?* and will be related to the link narrative has to that which has the power of orienting us.

The question, *Where are we?* is to be answered by pointing out the strong currents and forces that actually do structure our lives in contemporary culture. This question cannot be answered by saying that people find meaning in their lives because they stay faithful to a particular framework as Taylor suggests. The question has to be answered by looking at actual lives that can represent the way in which lives in our culture are

typically lived. By looking at an actual life, the constraints and opportunities for and against the good life can be articulated simply by being pointed out: they will be concretely instantiated. The concrete instantiation of a life against the background of what it means to live a life of significance or a good life can provide the philosophical orientation needed to respond to the question of the good life. This supports the main thesis of my essay, namely, that orientation can be discovered *between* theory and narrative.

For this presentation I will look at the actual lives of the fictional characters of *America America*. I will explicate the constraints and opportunities of contemporary culture by relating the concrete instances found in the narrative to explanations of what it means to be engaged in living a good life articulated theoretically by Charles Taylor in *The Ethics of Authenticity*, and I will attempt to ground the explanation of how things can orient us with Martin Heidegger's essay "Art and Space."

### **Section One.** *A Great Loss*

There are two distinct time periods in the novel that I wish to discuss: the childhood of Corey Sifter which is marked by great hope and potential and the adulthood of Corey Sifter which is marked by the character of decency that is attached to a sentiment of great loss which carries with it a sense of fatalism.

Corey's childhood takes place within a rich context and is attached to engagements that offer a strong sense of meaning. The Metarey estate, in upstate New York, on which he is employed and treated almost like a son, besides being a farm, is the center of the community he lives in. He is given a position to work for and to be in direct



contact with Liam Metarey. The recognition he gets from Mr. Metarey is of the most substantial nature: Liam is the most respected person in the community due to his position of power and his democratic use of it. The scope of meaning for the activities Corey is engaged in only became larger when he begins assisting in Senator Bonwiller's campaign for presidency, which has its campaign headquarters on the Metarey estate. It is the early seventies, and Corey is just finishing high school.

Corey's adulthood consists of his career of owning, publishing, and writing for the local paper; his family life; visiting his father; and recounting his past.

What I want to highlight are the changes the culture goes through from Corey's childhood to the time in which this story is being narrated. I want to investigate the important claim Corey makes when in response to the destruction of the Metarey estate he says: "This is the fall of our culture, Dad. This is the end of a way of life."<sup>39</sup> To do this I will look at the life of Corey-Sifter-the-narrator in his present life (the year is 2006) and compare it to his childhood and the world in which he lived with Mr. Metarey. Before I begin, I want to clarify that I don't think the culture makes an epochal change in the 35 or so years between Corey's childhood and his adulthood, but the character of the culture changes in degree; the forces behind the things that structure our lives do so in a way that renders our lives less meaningful, and the culture's currents and disorienting forces become more powerful and overwhelming.

In one sense this inquiry into orientation is an act of retrieval. The momentum of my argument, from the beginning, comes from the fact that things from the past have the power to orient our lives. This, of course, has its own problematic. I must guard against nostalgia and extolling tradition for tradition's sake. I have to show that "the way

progress is” is not just the superseding of one culture by another and should be accepted as this because this is how history works.<sup>40</sup> I have to show that things and practices of significance are what make a culture and a life good and that the moral implications of “progress” must attend to this.

The first parallel between generations I wish to draw in *America America* that will make the comparison between the two time periods possible stands out sharply. Both Liam and Corey take a member of the community under their wing. Corey’s intern Trieste closely parallels Corey in his youth. But these two differ in an important way. In a moment of reflection Corey distinguishes a difference between the ambitions of the two generations: “These days, of course, I’m reminded of Trieste – although her resolve is in the form of vigorous originality, and ours, if I have to put a word on it, was in the form of *hunger*.”<sup>41</sup> Although this difference may just be a difference in intellectual capacities, as Corey attempts to explain it, they are also differences of type. These types are both related to the moral ideal of seeking fulfillment for oneself but do so in two different ways. The attempt at originality requires some type of guidance; otherwise it is originality for originality’s sake and becomes problematic. Hunger, although possibly unreflective, at least suggests that there is something worth being hungry for. By looking closer at the difference between the two, we can get a grip on what the different attitudes require in practice and offer in terms of fulfillment. Trieste is not a good example of someone who is thoroughly engaged in the practice of originality for originality’s sake, but this way of life is most clearly identified, in the novel, with her and her generation.

We confront Trieste forging her own way in several instances and for different reasons, some possibly detrimental others harmless. First, she rejects conforming to the

cultural norms of dress; she dresses like a boy.<sup>42</sup> She extends this rejection further in her rejection of manufactured clothing. In one scene, we see her wearing a plastic trash bag for a rain coat.<sup>43</sup> Although creative, perfectly harmless, and possibly illuminating, these modes of rejection don't suggest a way of life that can unfold into meaningful, fulfilling pursuits. Her rejection of female attire illuminates the way we, in general, mindlessly conform to cultural norms that are gender-specific, but it doesn't suggest a principled alternative way of life other than the option of the ironic, and as we will see this becomes problematic when applied to that which centers our lives. Her rejection of manufactured clothing is problematic because it doesn't deviate far enough from what is being rejected. Her alternative still rests heavily upon the technological infrastructure that makes it possible for us to have materials such as plastic bags. If her rejection of manufactured clothing seeks to substitute that which is manufactured, it must go further than simply replacing one manufactured thing for another. Secondly, Trieste breaks a cultural norm supported by the law: we find her robbing from the rich.<sup>44</sup> It is an unsubstantial theft; she takes a spoon from one of the benefactors who financially support the internship she has won with Corey's newspaper. The theft is symbolic, but it could be detrimental if the principle it embodied were to become the principle that guided a way of life. This can be clarified by examining the necessary conditions for the ways of life that offer fulfillment within contemporary culture.

Seeking self-fulfillment is an approach to a meaningful life that is to be seen in contrast to already being part of a meaningful order from which one's role or place in that order would be sufficient to provide the context for a life of meaning. Self- fulfillment is a modern notion that comes with the moral ideals related to the individual: dignity and

freedom of choice. It replaced the premodern condition where meaningful orders pervaded the lives of everyone. Seeking a meaningful life through the notion of self-fulfillment is the first constraint or condition I would like to explore in relation to the space within which we strive for the good life in our culture.

I am going to present the concrete cases of two different attempts at living a meaningful life through self-fulfillment. First will be Trieste and her generation. The second will be by examining Senator Bonwiller's life which I am relating to the *hunger* Corey ascribes to himself. My claim is that both are deviant forms of attempting to live by the ethic of self-fulfillment, but I want to also show that as our culture "progresses" these attempts become more deviant or irrational.

Charles Taylor clarifies this issue and argues that the ambition for originality must be tethered to something of significance for it to be coherent and significant. Those who fight so vigorously for originality for its own sake or as an ideal in itself "recognize few external moral demands or serious commitments to others," and expect that everyone has "the right to develop their own form of life, grounded on their own sense of what is really important or of value."<sup>45</sup> Those who make this attempt are easily conflated with the narcissist or hedonist. This impulse for a way of life differs from the notion of *hunger* that Corey describes his childhood with. *Hunger* implies that there is something outside of and other than oneself that can be brought into one's being and allowed to effect some change. When this attitude is combined with the ethic of self-fulfillment, we have a coherent way of describing our pursuit of authenticity, as opposed to those pursuing originality at their whim.

Authenticity is a form of self-fulfillment that claims that “each of us has an original way of being human.”<sup>46</sup> To live up to this originality is what the morality most clearly espoused in our culture is about. But when we pursue authenticity completely independent of any claims that other people or things may have on us, we do so with a disregard for the conditions of possibility for self-fulfillment. When I just randomly assign the practices and attributes that make my authenticity significant, I’ve missed what it means to participate in something of significance. For example, claiming my authenticity rests in the fact that I simply “question authority” is insignificant to any way of life that doesn’t have some link to something else that makes that act significant.<sup>47</sup> This, opposed to the ability to be a mid-wife or the desire to fight pollution, both of which can be linked to one’s concern for fellow human beings or life in general, reflects the least tenable pursuit of authenticity. Just deeming that something is significant fails to meet the criterion of significance: if just deeming that something is significant is all that is required to make something significant, then everything is potentially significant and this renders the notion of significance empty. The power of choice is important because it makes the individual capable of choosing things of higher significance than others. The power of choice is not capable of choosing its own ‘power of choosing’ as being the hallmark of significance because then, again, there would be no boundaries upon what is significant or not. Every example of free choice would be an instance of authenticity. This would make the content of one’s life irrelevant. But the content of our lives is what is most relevant.

The difference between the generations of Trieste and Corey-as-a-teenager is one marked by the pursuits of authenticity changing by degree. Trieste doesn’t exactly

represent a devious form of authenticity, and it is not with her generation that these ways of pursuing authenticity arise, but they do seem to be tending toward more and more deviant forms.<sup>48</sup> We can see this progression by comparing the preceding example with the form of authenticity that marks the life of Senator Bonwiller.

Bonwiller is clearly defined, yet remains elusive. It is hard to balance the calm picture we have of him reading Walt Whitman in the car with the ruthless tactics he employs in the attempt to become more politically powerful. But it is clear that his whole life, and any form of energy put into it, is to attain the position of president. Unfortunately, a life absolutely committed to politics is one that is necessarily incomplete. We see this play out in the lack of structure there is in Bonwiller's life outside of the political arena. The largest problems seem to be alcohol and the fact that his marriage is one of instrumental value. Because his marriage is this way, it cannot offer the richness and structure needed in our lives outside of our work. Worse, it is unclear what is motivating Bonwiller's pursuit of the presidency. If Bonwiller recognizes the fact that he is a unique person with certain attributes that make him a viable candidate for the presidency, the pursuit of this position becomes significant because of the changes he can make for social justice, protection of the environment, and the quality of life in general. But if he is fueled only by unchecked personal ambition, his motive is narcissistic and represents a deviant form of self-fulfillment. Corey reflects upon the dual nature these tensions create in a person:

And this is where some balance must be found between its attainment and its allotment, between the unquenchable desire in any politician to rise, and the often humbling requirement that one's station must now be used to some benefit. And

here, of course, is where corruption begins; for power contains an irresistible urge to further itself: there is always the next race. But when finally there isn't any more, when at last there is no more ambition to quell, no more inchoate striving to follow as a guidestar, then a politician must make a transformation that he may have no more ability to make than he has to grow wings and fly. He must change his personal ambition into ambition for his country.<sup>49</sup>

Perhaps it is too ideal to think that ambition for one's country is enough to get one elected to office, but that is where ultimate significance of such a position comes from – not from fulfilling one's own personal ambition. Logically, striving for greatness is always morally deviant. Greatness is contingent upon things beyond one's control. Discipline and perseverance are the virtues that prepare one for greatness, not unrestrained ambition, but only historical contingency will actually deliver the goods. Ambition itself is not to be stamped out of our nature - it doesn't always direct one toward that which is immoral- but morality must address our actions with regard to it. Bonwiller becomes corrupt when he attempts to control those things that are out of his control. When he begins to try to author the truth by controlling what the newspapers print, his ambition turns into deception and what his motives for his country are become diluted and unclear.

These two examples of devious forms of authenticity both point to what is needed for one to engage in a coherent form of authenticity or self-fulfillment. Taylor calls this requirement a background of significance. The things and practices that are being pursued in one's life require a "background of intelligibility."<sup>50</sup> This background of intelligibility gives the choices we are presented with the significance they have. When

choosing to pursue the office of president, Bonwiller wouldn't be able to explain the significance of becoming president if the office itself didn't have the immense responsibility and possibility for real social change that it does. What makes Bonwiller's motive potentially deviant and devious is that the responsibilities of the office fall away as his ambition for it increases: his actions begin to negate the very nature of the office he hopes he will soon hold, and the depth, significance, and intelligibility that make such a pursuit significant in a coherent way begin to disappear.

It is crucial to recognize that this background of intelligibility must be concretely instantiated. Taylor doesn't seem to venture into the territory of exactly what is going to make up a background of intelligibility and how this can be taken up with by individuals. To respond to this concern we have to turn to a person who appears to attend to the background of intelligibility required for a meaningful life.

This person's life would contrast with the life of Bonwiller when he is interpreted as a narcissist. This interpretation of Bonwiller represents a powerful attitude in American culture. Many ways of life attract individuals for the position of respect and status they offer without accounting for where the status or significance of the position comes from. Of course most ways of life just indicate the amount of money that is involved in pursuing them and that is enough to quench the American mind's need for significance. But we must push through this illusion of significance and determine what money actually does create the opportunity for and whether or not that can provide the background of significance required for a rich, meaningful life. *America America* helps us here again through the illustration of the great democratic capitalist Liam Metarey.



I want to attempt to find the background of significance for the life of Mr. Metarey and do so in the concrete so we can have an example of the content of the good life. Because he is affluent and not pursuing money, something else must stand as the object of significance in his life. We can begin to understand what this significance is by attempting to understand what Corey means by “possibility” when he reflects that what he “longed for was not the earthly comfort of that world, [Mr. Metarey’s world], but all its possibility.”<sup>51</sup>

Mr. Metarey stands out because he resists the temptations that affluence creates in our culture. He is not an out-of-control consumer seeking the next quickest and easiest pleasure available. Quite to the contrary; he toils on his farm. Outside of the expenses related directly to his estate, family, and community, he spends the majority of his money and resources on preserving the environment and campaigning for political justice. The democratic impulse he has in politics also pervades his entire life. He is responsible for Corey’s opportunity to get a higher education. This defines the active Liam Metarey. This defines the man you would encounter if you ran into him on the street. Of course his opportunities to be generous, to maintain a farm and a campaign headquarters, to supply members of the community with employment, to live a lifestyle that includes sailing and spontaneous plane rides, is a result of his wealth. This great advantage over others creeps into his being, and not in the way one might expect. He maintains his kindness, enthusiasm, and democratic spirit almost always, but there is a dark current that flows just beneath the surface of this great American man. This must be addressed before describing the background of significance to his life.

In the beginning of the book, when Corey first starts working on the estate, Liam tells Corey that “work will set you free.”<sup>52</sup> Corey reflects upon this statement later in life: the words “returned to me with a shock when I came upon them again, six years later, on my first trip to Europe, and only suggested once more that our worlds –our lives- are not at all what they appear.”<sup>53</sup> Corey probably saw the German words that translate into this phrase inscribed above the entrance way of a concentration camp in what is now Poland.<sup>54</sup> His reflection suggests that Mr. Metarey perceived that daily life itself, in some ways, reflected the worst conditions possible. For Mr. Metarey to make this comment and maintain the mood that is typical of him -kind, concerned, and interested- is to suggest that he was all of these things in the face of a great guilt or perceived horror that lay somewhere beneath the surface. The truth of this arises out of half of his complicated view of nature. Mr. Metarey finds nature exquisite, but he also deems it “utterly without mercy.”<sup>55</sup> Further evidence for Mr. Metarey’s conflicted nature comes out when the article accusing the Senator of being involved in JoEllen’s death finally hit the newspaper. Corey gets a glimpse of Mr. Metarey: “Something came over his face as he did – a look of sudden, deadening fatigue...he never told me what he knew about all of it, but at that moment, he came the closest to doing it...His face looked as though for a moment he’d taken off a mask.”<sup>56</sup> Seeing the ‘real’ Mr. Metarey is described as seeing a man plagued by deadening fatigue. We know Mr. Metarey was in the Korean War and witnessed some of the worst of what can happen to a person, and we know he is aware of the savage way in which his father wrestled the land and people of his time to secure his fortune. Perhaps the burden of this was constantly in tension with the Mr. Metarey that

appeared to Corey as a child, and Mr. Metarey's involvement in the cover-up of the death of JoEllen tipped the scales of his life towards seeking a final rest to his worries.<sup>57</sup>

It is always a possibility that the hope for a good life can be shattered permanently by a psychological trauma, but that doesn't close the door to the discussion of the good life. There are degrees of psychological trauma and the ways of life that are espoused in the discussion of the good life can, more or less, still function for those with psychological troubles. I mention this because part of the goal of the good life is a psychological one. If our goal is fulfillment, then what tells us that we are approaching or participating in what fulfillment means is not simply the logical analysis of the actions we take with reference to the goal in mind. That is part of it, but one's way of life must also offer some sense of fulfillment, some positive feelings - in short, happiness. How this works is complex and must be detailed, but I believe that those are the requirements to understand our goal when we seek orientation to the good life. With this in mind there are moments of inspiration and fortitude that outweigh or at least counterbalance the idea that Mr. Metarey's life is 'truly' dark and without beauty, humor, and a sense of love. Corey rarely portrays Mr. Metarey as anything short of the greatest person he has ever known and his measure of a person is one that seems fit to be deemed excellent.<sup>58</sup> Further, there is a coherency to the practices, commitments, and values that frame Mr. Metarey's life that can be explicated to show how orientation to the good life can be found and a hint to its structure even if it cannot provide happiness for one with a damaged or uncharacteristic psychology. I want to turn to these things and hold them up to the light of what can first make Mr. Metarey's, and in turn our, daily life significant.

If our goal is a life of meaning and significance, of depth and accomplishment, within a world of just dealings, then the practices we participate in must be able to offer this meaning, and they must be open to all, to some degree. For this reason, I am going to pick two events that fit this criterion in *America America* that seem to answer, in a particular, concrete way, the question concerning the need of orientation in our daily lives. The events will articulate part of the background of significance to Mr. Metarey's life and suggest a way to begin to answer, in a concrete and principled manner, the question of orientation.

## **Section Two.** *Daily-Life Practices*

The first event I will discuss is the mundane task of shoveling the driveway. In this example I want to point out the following: first, there is a unique way of thinking required to strive for the good life; second, significance arises as a force outside of ourselves and supplies meaning through our relationship with something other than what we arbitrarily choose or simply feel holds significance; third, I want to argue that the context of such happenings is absolutely crucial and that things and practices of significance require that our relationship to them is defined by *closeness*.

In one scene during a snowstorm the tractor that is used to plow the driveway breaks down. We find Corey and Liam discussing the situation. Corey suggests that he can call his neighbor and borrow his tractor. "Oh no, [Liam responds]. The trick's to see the opportunity. That's what my old man would have said. Come on – let's pull the damn thing back into the barn and then we can get to shoveling by hand."<sup>59</sup> Here, Liam chooses to be guided by a principle his father has taught him. Of course to Corey such an endeavor seemed "odd." And even for the reader, choosing to toil, when the means to

effortlessly clear the driveway are a phone call away, perhaps seems skewed. What is guiding Liam to choose to engage in such an activity? What exactly is this an opportunity for?

Charles Taylor points out the fact that one of the causes of the malaise or meaninglessness in our current culture is the absolute dominance of instrumental reason. Describing instrumental reason as “the kind of rationality we draw on when we calculate the most economical application of means to a given end,” he suggests that this has added to the disenchantment of the world.<sup>60</sup> The dominance of instrumental reason is another one of the great forces in our culture that is not addressed by Rawls and his stance of neutrality on the space of the good life. Instrumental reason governs our dealings to the extent that it has become taken for granted that the easiest, quickest, most economical means to any end is the *good* way to proceed. What this does to our daily lives is structure them in a way that extracts us from the intimate contact we could have with a task and puts us at a technological distance from it to complete the task quicker and easier.

Between Corey and the snow and the driveway are a tractor and a plow. The human effort required to push snow uphill or downhill is the same. But as soon as it becomes apparent that Liam wants to shovel the driveway by hand, the fact that the “drive [is] sloping uphill to the sycamores” is no longer a missed feature of the landscape.<sup>61</sup> What is beginning to happen in this scene is that elements of reality are rising to the fore in an instance where a technological fix would have left them concealed. Interestingly, Liam states that “Seneca Indians used to do this sort of thing when they wanted a vision,” referring to the seemingly “impossible” task of physical exertion that

lay before them.<sup>62</sup> The Seneca didn't live in a world characterized by disenchantment. Their world was characterized by a spiritual order found in nature that could be interacted with through the intimate contact they had with their environment and each other. There was no question of how one lives a good life or where one finds meaning in life in their culture; the Seneca were always and already part of a great order of significance, and an individual's role in their band was anointed simply by the context in which they found themselves. We are lacking this context now – for good and bad reasons. But the solution to recovering the good and meaningful in our lives is not to revert to the belief system that structured the lives of the Seneca; that would be working in the wrong direction. Instead, we should turn to reality to seek orientation by first recognizing the technological distance we put between ourselves and reality and that there is something to gain by breaking this distance down. This is captured in old man Metarey's phrase "to see the opportunity." The opportunity is not, ironically, one of a cost-benefit analysis that might be praised by such a capitalist family; rather, Liam and Corey find themselves in a position where the world is putting a claim on them and they rise to meet the challenge through active engagement because of what *that* offers to those involved: to see it as an end in itself as opposed to seeing the shoveling simply as a means to another end.

Perhaps this is a virtue that capitalism has erased or lost along the way. Instead of being guided solely by instrumental reason towards the most efficient means to the decided upon end, the activities that make up the content of such pursuits are ends in themselves, as well as means; they can make up the rich content of our lives. To

understand more clearly the “opportunity” shoveling gives Liam and Corey, we must look closer at what instrumental reason fails to provide.

One of the difficulties with instrumental reason is that, like some analytic and some continental philosophy, it is aimless. Why do we want the most efficient means to our given ends? What are we to do once we get to these ends? This is, in part, the state of contemporary culture. Instrumental reason has driven our society to solve the problems that present themselves as intolerable to our lives. Medical research discovers cures and vaccines for diseases that would otherwise strip some of the possibility for life at all. Here, instrumental reason as the guide for solving problems should be championed when the needs are appropriate to what it can provide: economical, efficient, scientific solutions. But in terms of how we are to live our lives and what makes them purposeful by explaining what practices we are to incorporate into our lives and why, it is unclear why we would be seeking economy and efficiency only. We are also seeking happiness, meaning, richness, and the possibility of fulfillment. I want to argue that such an end is final and contextual and cannot be captured through an instrumental approach. Eoghan Metarey’s vision of “opportunity” speaks to how such ends may be striven for.

Technology as a human artifact or device that has the ability to change our involvement with and perception of space in our daily life for reasons of ease and efficiency (as it eliminates the difference between the strain of pushing snow uphill as opposed to down in this example) constructs a kind of abstract space in our lives. To some extent we are abstracted from our context and lose the closeness to a reality that engages our capacities to a different extent. But when technology breaks down, or we consciously choose to limit what technology we include in our practices, we confront our

context in a way in which it offers us something final. Towards the end of shoveling Corey notes that he “began to feel the euphoria of that kind of hard work in that kind of cold weather. Of that kind of discipline against what the inner voice says is insurmountable.”<sup>63</sup> Euphoria can be caused by many things: drugs, sex, great exertion (as here), or through spiritual meditation. As stated before, positive feelings are only a sign that something of significance was experienced; they are not always necessary for an experience to be significant, and they most certainly are not sufficient for deeming an experience significant. What is needed to supplement this feeling is an explanation of how the experience fits in to the ‘background of intelligibility’ of our world and our goal of finding a rich, meaningful, happy life.

Here I think we are required to address the fact that our lives necessarily consist of the tasks required for living. What this concretely means differs from person to person, but everyone is charged in some way with facing the tasks of simply living and must produce some *way* of living. What I believe is lost to instrumental reason, and, in turn, to a majority of the practices engaged with in our culture, is, first, that the means to the ends are absolutely crucial: *how* I reach a state of euphoria, or how the tasks of daily living are achieved must play some role in determining the character of the practices we engage in, not just the fact that they have procured the desired end. Connected to this is the fact that the source of significance stems from that which I am engaged with. Taylor clearly makes this point about the content of the major commitments one has in one’s life, such as “God, or a political cause, or tending the earth,” but he doesn’t address the *manner* in which daily activities should be fulfilled such that we can understand them as adding to the sense of fulfillment of our lives rather than detracting from them.<sup>64</sup>



One way to respond to the “inconveniences” of daily living is to replace all of the activities that are required of us to maintain a dwelling and provide sustenance for ourselves by following the guide of instrumental reason, but in doing so we lose something important. Consider the difference between the estates of Corey’s past and the ones of his present:

The Wantik property is magnificent – horse stables, a dark-bottomed pool, a main house built from stone that looks as though it was brought over by ship from an English manor with the moss still on it. It’s even more impressive at a glance than Aberdeen West used to be. Even at its apex, the Metarey estate maintained all the equipment and services of a working piece of land, while at the Wantiks’ you’d be hard-pressed to find a stack of firewood. Let alone a metal lathe. But you could no doubt take your choice from a shelf of extra-plush towels in a variety of colors if you wandered into one of the pool cabanas.<sup>65</sup>

The Wantik property is a mansion that Corey goes to as an adult. The mansion’s virtues are that it looks as if it was transplanted from another time and place, and that it is seemingly self-sufficient without human participation. But these virtues are mocked by Corey in the final analysis with his ability to point out the only remaining activity associated to the estate. The magnificence of the mansion is superficial. It belongs in a museum; it has replaced all possible life-enriching activity or engagement related to daily living with the technology that will simply procure the ends desired. This leaves those associated with it to engage in absolutely insignificant activities such as choosing which color towel they want to use. Here, our capacities are left unexercised; we are expected to have no skill, and any pleasure associated with what we do participate in leaves us

craving the material means that Wantik has simply because of the fleeting pleasure they produce and the power they have in making our lives easier, two things that we should be suspicious of when we consider the character and trajectory of our lives.

Let us return to the first example to concretize the background of significance of the engaging practices related to daily life. Liam and Corey don't ignore the claim the snow, the hill, and the cold make on them by seeking the quickest and easiest way to complete the task before them, perhaps with the goal in mind to move on to more significant endeavors. In our daily lives we can get swept away with this type of thinking. We fulfill one task simply to begin another. Our lives can stretch out behind us as a long continuum of episodes and activities that can easily be seen as constructing a meaningless whole. The power of contemporary culture is its ability to mask this. It does so by incorporating pleasure into its practices and discouraging the need for reflection. Pleasure can easily be mistaken for happiness: it is part of it. But happiness requires moral significance and pleasure is merely a psychological state.

Significance arises out of the relationship Liam and Corey have with their context and each other during their activity. Their context engages some of their capacities to an extreme extent as well as confronting them with the eloquence of reality, where reality's claim is brought closer to them once the technological distance is broken down. There is the possibility of accomplishment *in its significant sense* here. Again, "accomplishment" is another term of significance that requires more than the feeling of euphoria or pleasure. Both the context that one finds oneself in and the company one finds oneself with, along with reference to one's own capacities, as well as the place the practice has in one's daily

life, all this determines the possible sense of (significant) accomplishment that practices may provide.

Now we can sketch the moral difference between plowing the drive with a tractor and shoveling it by hand. First, the technological space that is being experienced does not engage one's capacities in the way it does when the same practice must be completed without technology. Because of this the technological practice offers a lesser degree of accomplishment and gets pushed towards being simply of instrumental value. Second, the opportunity for this particular environment's reality to become eloquent, or for it to begin to reveal itself in all of its dimensions, is to some degree lost. The falling snow and the coming dark (along with the knowledge that a warm house is close by for when the task is done) can make for a magnificent visual setting, but the sounds of snow fall and owls hooting during their night hunting, and the scent of the night air, will be displaced by the roar of an engine and the powerful smell of burning fuel. Finally, the solitary activity of plowing removes the possibility for a moment of significance to occur through the recognition of another.

In the end, I don't think these factors decide for us whether or not we should plow driveways or shovel them by hand; there is no universal rule about snow removal to deduce from this example. But what the example does show us is that, by degree, we can incorporate activities in our lives that can offer us significance through accomplishment in relation to our context of daily living.

Understandably the example above may seem mundane and not capable of being part of the content of the good life. In our current culture's collective imagination, success (the good life) is in part defined by the ability to avoid or escape onerous

practices. But I want to point out that this follows only if we take an instrumental approach to our practices. Although at times burdensome and necessarily endless, the tasks of house-holding are part of our lives. The things that are naturally a part of our lives should be addressed in a thoughtful way. First, we must recognize that the nature of happiness requires that we find significance in what we do, not simply in the ends procured by what we do. This forces us to consider *how* we are going to do things, all things. Second, we must recognize the presence of technology. Technology has the ability to limit our engagement with the tasks that must be done. Before we get starry-eyed with technology's ability to almost eliminate our involvement in practices like house-holding, we must be wary about what we are losing if we replace engagements like shoveling, heating our homes, and cooking with their technological "fixes." The first things of importance to the good life that I suggest we lose are the closeness and accomplishment described in the example of Corey and Liam shoveling. But one could argue that these two elements of the good life could be found in different instances if we eliminated the need to engage in the tasks of house-holding. Instead of shoveling a driveway, we could be spending that time climbing a mountain or hiking through a marsh. The problem with this type of response is that it ignores the structure or rhythm and necessity of daily living. Our consciousness of this rhythm is a crucial element to what I have been calling closeness. Whether you have a million servants or the most self-sufficient technology possible, one will still need to lie down to sleep at night and rise in the morning and answer to his growling stomach. Attempting to cut out the engagement with the tasks of house-holding requires a technological fix; actually cutting out the need for practices entirely is not an option. That this is the case forces us to

recognize that happiness is, in part, meeting the claim that the rhythm of a day imposes upon us. *How* this is done is what is of crucial importance. From the example and argument above I have suggested that it be done, if our aim is a rich, meaningful, life, with the notion of closeness and accomplishment in mind. Allowing technology or someone else to fulfill the tasks of house-holding eliminates all chance for these tasks to be done with an experience of closeness or a sense of accomplishment.

Importantly, I don't want to suggest that we eliminate technology. I have been using the term technology to refer to the human-made artifacts that replace our *involvement* with the sustainability and enrichment of our own lives. Our goal is happiness, and happiness is found, not through deadening toil, but through engagement with the practices that present themselves as part of our position as house-holders, members of society, workers (in the richest sense), and inhabitants of nature.

The example given above that can stand for the activities related to house-holding is made significant by the context of Mr. Metarey's dwelling. The land, the weather, his house, the fields, the trees, and the water define the base or concrete strata from which significance in life can emerge. The land is significant because it produces and sustains the footing on which anything we do rests. Wendell Berry suggests that the "ground under [our] feet" is the common ground from which equality and freedom can be given its content.<sup>66</sup> Since what we do on this land can suggest what is worth being free and equal for it seems prudent to look for a specific way the land itself can orient us.

### **Section Three.** *The Tree as a Thing of Orientation*

To clarify the importance of the content and context of the activities we engage in, I now want to turn to a second example in *America America* that can be articulated by relating it to Heidegger's essay "Art and Space."

Attempting to uncover "genuine space," Heidegger links the etymology of the German word for space to the notion of "clearing away". Space, in this sense, hints that "clearing away brings forth locality preparing for dwelling."<sup>67</sup> I have described dwelling above as the involvement and participation with the conditions, context, and tasks that are required in dwelling. These tasks are to be done in a way that is marked by closeness and accomplishment. When we consider the leveling of the Metarey estate in order to clear the way for the mall that will replace it, our comparison between what the estate offered in terms of closeness and accomplishment and what the mall offers brings an important truth to the fore about the direction our culture is going.

Malls are our nation's monuments to consumption. Our skills are left unemployed while we shop. The relationship between the items we purchase and the contexts in which they are produced is non-existent. We are even ripped out of the actual environment within which the mall is placed. Temperature controls replace the weather. Artificial light replaces the pace at which the day is marked out by the arc transcribed by sun. Scenery is replaced by advertising. Essentially, our technological powers and the quick, easy pleasure of consumption create an artificial environment within which our long-term concerns are driven to the back of our minds and our desires are met by the fleeting sense of power and pleasure procured through consumption.

There is something corrupt about the way of life represented by the mall. Heidegger helps to explain this. “Clearing away is the release of places.”<sup>68</sup> “Release” is to be contrasted with “creation.” Genuine space, the space within which we will find the tasks and work that mark a life of significance, is not created; it is found, and in this case allowed to show itself. The mall does the exact opposite. It creates its own environment and tasks. One way of illustrating the loss that this creates is by the fact that I could put you in a mall anywhere in the country and then ask you to close your eyes and then I could transport you to another mall elsewhere in the country and you would not be able to tell me where in the world you are by relating the differences of contexts you notice. It’s not an earth-shaking point, but it highlights the loss associated with mapping a self-created context over the one that actually has a claim on us and that we are required to respond to in order to dwell – the one that can be released through the clearing away Heidegger is talking about. By “required,” I mean that we must engage with what is being concealed, but is ever-present, behind the technological infrastructure. We meet this reality when technology breaks down or we attempt to sideline it for moral reasons.

I am strongly tempted to adjust Heidegger’s phrase “clearing-away” so that it more clearly suggests “clearing-a-way.” Clearing-a-way suggests the release of places by finding a relationship with our contexts that appropriately and uniquely addresses us in our capacity and needs. This can be clarified by the idea that dwelling is not exemplified by something like the mall in that it overrides place and temporarily pacifies our desires through activities that are marked by the pleasures and ease of consumption. Rather, clearing-a-way puts us in a position where the relationship of our capacities and needs to

the claims of our surroundings is one of engaging interaction promoting a sense of significance.

The revealing aspect of space or clearing away is that it “gathers...things in their belonging together.”<sup>69</sup> Our belonging to the context we find ourselves in requires explication. How do we belong to our environment or world? The answer to this question gives us the mode of being in the world. For Heidegger it is a specifically ontological question. But it seems that it must be an ontological and moral question. Ontology reveals accurately the world in which we live and the type of beings we are. But it, by itself, is not enough to allow us to conclude that how we are (even at some primordial or essential level) is how we should be. A moral dimension must be added, and the gap between what is and what should be must be bridged. The moral dimension, I want to argue, opens up when an individual becomes an advocate of significance. Someone speaks in a certain way for something significant (without deception and from genuine feelings invoked by the thing being spoken for) and thus what is being spoken for emerges as morally significant. This is not to say that it is one’s ability to speak a certain way that determines what is significant; this would allow for a deceptive discourse that could arbitrarily assign significance to things. Significance ultimately comes only from a thing or practice or event and our relationship to it, and these two elements can’t be split when evaluating moral discourse. But, that being said, it is only how that thing, event, or practice *resonates* with an individual that the moral dimension opens up. Enthusiasm for something and the expression of devastation over the loss of something are both moral expressions. Importantly, I don’t want to imply that this is in any way subjective. The subject’s response or mode of speaking for something is only



the hint that something is significant. The thing itself, which invokes such a response, is the final arbiter of whether or not it is significant in general. But we can only get there through experience or by being guided there. Things of general significance, things that can “gather things in their belonging together,” are where we turn for orientation in our lives.

Heidegger claims that the sculpture in its ability to gather and embody a region or a context and disclose the “dwelling for man” could be an orienting force that counters the reign of instrumental reason.<sup>70</sup> Although this may be true in the sense that it is possible for a sculpture to do that, the example of sculpture in *America America* actually conceals reality rather than disclosing it. I want to argue that the actual tree, not the sculpture that replaced it, can act as something we can be oriented by, and that Corey’s reaction of devastation when he discovers that the tree has been removed is the signal of its significance.

Compare the great bur oak of Corey’s childhood to the sculpture. We encounter this tree of the past when Corey and his father are asked by Mr. Metarey to fix a plumbing problem on the estate. Again, Mr. Metarey does not subscribe to instrumental reason to figure out the solution to the problem. The most efficient and economical way of dealing with the plumbing problem created by the oak’s root system would be to fell the great tree so that no problems will arise in the future. It would be a method of securing dwelling from the inconveniences of the claims of other things and other people. In contrast to this, we are presented with the following care-full, skill-demanding, and patience requiring task of working with the tree:

And that was what we did then, before it was even light. The drip line of the tree reached well past the sewer, and when we arrived at Aberdeen West my father set to work with a lantern and an iron spike, testing the ground for roots. The big house was still dark. My father was whistling “Roddy McCorley,” but softly, and now and then he glanced up at the windows. When he was finished with the spike, we began digging, but before we were even down as far as our boots we had to switch from shovels to spades, wedging their narrow heads between the roots. They were everywhere. His whistling stopped. He gently pulled back the end of a tendril but as soon as he let go it dropped back into the hole. He stood looking at it in the rising light which was still pale but already warm on my back. “What would you use here, Cor?” he finally said.

“Half-hitch?”

“Not gentle enough. Mr. Metarey’s paying us not to hurt the tree.”

“Two half-hitches and a round-turn, then.”

“That’s what I would use,” he said. “Or a double-loop bowline.”

It was almost noon before I could stand as deep as my waist in the short section that we’d dug...The pipe still lay another foot or two below us. Around me, a net of tendrils hung gently in the set of slings I’d been making from mason’s line. A web of thicker arterial roots still stretched across the channel, though as intricately crossed as the tree’s crown, and at this depth we had to bend over to dig in them.<sup>71</sup>

The loss of this great tree represents how we are part of a culture that is on its way of thinning and cropping out our contexts of concern that make up the concrete background of significance required for lives of significance. In Charles Taylor’s presentation of

arguing for a coherent form of authenticity, he leaves out the fact that all the possible practices that provide this type of authenticity require a concrete, tangible setting. It is in these things that significance is first confronted, then reflected upon, and finally incorporated into our lives. The leveling and homogenization of our tangible settings strips us of the possibility of having regions or localities marked out by a natural and cultural history where things can maintain or gain moral significance.

The demands of the tree give Corey a task of significance. They demand skill and care. This skill and care is passed down from his father as Corey apprentices himself in his work. The work they do is done with awareness of the conditions required for their work: to avoid as best they can the high heat, they attempt to start before morning light. All of this positions Corey and his father in a relation with their context that engages their physical and mental skill for a matter of purpose: clearing-a-way with nature, not dominating it. The skills required and the context differs from the settings and devices that epitomize the interactions of the technological culture.

Consider the difference between using a computer and working on the tree the way Corey and his father do. Today, computers require no setting. Instead they impose an orientation to the world on us. The laptop can be brought and used anywhere. Having this freedom leaves us nowhere. The orientation and type of interaction the computer offers is either one of consumption (where a curiosity is satiated) or the computer provides a service that requires only an input, like the use of a calculator. Incorporating the computer into one's daily life is to make these practices easier and faster, not more fulfilling or engaging. Going to the theatre is replaced by videos. Letter writing is replaced by email. The depth and dimension of particularity of these practices is

exchanged for ease and efficiency, and we are left partaking in activities that lack a centering force to our lives. In contrast, dealing directly with the tree Corey meets something in all of its particularity and bottomless depth. The physical exhaustion from the work tells Corey that he is engaged in something demanding. This demand comes from *what the tree is* (not a representation of what the tree is) in relation to Corey's capacities, skills, and needs. This union is an example of how a tree "gathers things in their belonging together." An orientation to the world through the tree can highlight what is trivial about the computer by comparing the significance it brings, or fails to bring, to our lives.

Now consider the tree as a sculpture and Corey's reaction to it as further testimony to what is problematic about exchanging things and practices for artificial replacements that fail to put demands upon us.

From a distance the sculpture is mistaken for the actual tree.<sup>72</sup> Technology and representational art are both excellent at mimicking reality but ultimately must fail and be something other than what they are attempting to represent or procure. The dimensions specific to a certain thing cannot be entirely accounted for unless the thing is quite literally *reproduced*. Technological devices don't reproduce things, they replace them. We realize this as Corey gets closer to the tree the same way we should recognize the attractiveness of technology and its ultimate failure to center our lives. As the tree comes into resolution, the material it is made of, its lack of leaves, and Corey's father's description of its construction force Corey to say, "This is the fall of our culture, Dad. This is the end of a way of life."<sup>73</sup> What has ended or what has been lost are the concrete, engaging conditions that made up the context of Corey's and his father's life. The tree is

a bronze-plated concrete monument. Its shape was probably designed with a computer program. Corey and his father will never be asked to come tend to the roots of the tree in hopes of saving it and living with it. It requires no care to maintain its survival – it is not living. The sculpture represents the way the culture has begun to suck the life out of the things we could have the opportunity to engage with. This “life” is the source from which the opportunity of engagement – meaningful actions related to a possible way of life – comes from. Without it, we begin to surround ourselves with objects that disorient us and distance us from the things related to living and significant ways of life.

Ultimate significance rests in the meaning behind the mystery of the curve of the trunk, the texture of the bark, the outline of silhouette of the branches as they extend outward and up, and the changing color and frailty of the leaves “of the grandest of God’s trees.”<sup>74</sup> This is lost, in degree, when we stand before technological devices or tree sculptures.

I invoke God here to hint at that which is sacred. Belief is not required, only awe. This awe paired with an understanding of our embeddedness within that which is worthy of and invokes awe (the sacred) undergirds the life of significance. The justification of what is worthy of awe are the things themselves – their power, when properly spoken for, is the ability to gather a place and people, engage our capacities in a rich and complete way, and link us to an order or way of life that can be illuminated and experienced as meaningful.

Just giving an example of how the tree in contrast to a technological device can be a means of orientation is not enough. I must connect my example of an orienting thing (tree) to specific practices that can be taken up with in our culture. I must show how we

can find the rewarding engagement that makes up the content of a practice that is part of the good life at the level of a relationship between people and a tree.

I am encouraged in the direction I am taking my investigation by a suggestion made by Wendell Berry: “We have perhaps sufficient testimony, from artists and scientists both, that if we watch, refine our intelligence and our attention, curb our greed and our pride, work with care, have faith, a single tree might be enough” for orientation in our lives.<sup>75</sup>

## Chapter Three

### *Between Theory and Narrative: Moral Discourse and Orientation*

I have endorsed the move away from the abstract in order to secure a real sense for our lives. I do not think my rejection of purely abstract thinking means that I am arguing from something other than a philosophical standpoint. Wendell Berry writes that “directly opposed to... [the] abstraction of things is the idea of preciousness of individual lives and places.”<sup>76</sup> I have attempted to introduce this necessary element into moral discourse by bringing narrative into the discussion. The power of narrative comes from the concrete reality that it depicts and the “preciousness,” the awe-inspiring elements, and depth associated with reality. But it is by extracting reasoned discourse from the testimony *about the concrete*, somewhere between the concrete and abstract, between narrative and theory, where a specifically philosophical and moral language can arise in its own unique way. Narrative, besides being a diagnostic tool, can be the jumping off point or source from which moral discourse can arise. The discourse will not be abstract, but it will generalize about the concrete “here and now” by pointing out patterns or ways of action that appropriately address, by accounting for and stemming from, this ‘here and now.’

I will attempt to proceed with what I am calling moral discourse by grounding the notion of orientation within this discourse. I will explicate a particular notion of orientation with respect to Corey Sifter while attempting to speak of orientation in a more general way, referring to other narratives.

## **Section One. *Orientation to a World***

I began this essay discussing navigational orientation. I think it is crucial to return to this idea in the concrete. We are given an example of this in the beginning of *America America*. There we are presented with the Lodge Chief, a “great Norway pine. The Lodge Chief had been planted three hundred years ago by the Seneca as a beacon for lake travelers, and in its deep shade I sat looking over forty miles of tree and meadow.”<sup>77</sup> The tree actually provided a means for orientation to those traveling over the lake. I have suggested that once again a tree can provide us with orientation. But orientation has come to mean something more than merely having one’s bearings. Orientation also means having our bearings towards something that is a matter of concern. This protects us from “the freedom of arbitrariness” and possible meaninglessness in a world that is stripped of landmarks. What makes a tree something that is a matter of concern?

In the previous chapter I argued that the tree is significant because it “gathers things in their belonging together.” This was described as the tree demanding to be treated in a specific way; otherwise it would be destroyed (the fate of the tree when viewed by blind instrumental reason after it presents itself as impinging upon our immediate existence, or if it is seen as merely a useful resource) or it wouldn’t be a tree (example of the tree as a sculpture). The Berry quote that concluded that chapter and my discussion of the ultimate meaning of a tree suggests that a tree is surrounded by a meaningful mystery or possibility that can continuously rejuvenate our own existence. But that rejuvenation doesn’t happen by simply going to a tree and demanding rejuvenation from it. I believe that we must respond in a unique way in our encounter



with the tree or gathering thing in order for it to be able to play some role in sustaining us in our lives in a substantial, enduring way.

Heidegger discusses the power of a thing more completely in his essay “The Thing.”<sup>78</sup> Unfortunately, the example that Heidegger gives of a thing is embedded in a very specific time and place which is left concealed in his essay. This makes it difficult to understand exactly how the thing has this power to orient us in our lives or allow the space within which a rich, meaningful life may unfold. But he does suggest the need for a unique way of thinking (which also entails a way of acting) that “is a step back from the thinking that merely represents – that is, explains – to the thinking that responds and recalls.”<sup>79</sup> From this I believe we can take further moral guidance. If we could find a way to engage and respond to our environment, our world, and the things that are central to our specific time and place, then through them we can gain perspective on the order of our lives. This perspective is ultimately orientation, and it would put us in a position to actively participate in the good that life has to offer. If we take this idea of the power of things and add to it the notion of dwelling that Heidegger illuminates in “Building Dwelling Thinking” (“BDT”), we can round out our understanding of orientation and see how it may be applied to the life of Corey Sifter, and our lives.<sup>80</sup>

In “BDT,” Heidegger describes dwelling as the essence of what humans do: “The way in which you are and I am, the manner in which we humans are on the earth, is... dwelling.”<sup>81</sup> Building is subsumed by dwelling in that it is part of dwelling: it is not to be thought of as an entirely different activity. And “building as dwelling unfolds into the building that cultivates growing things and the building that erects buildings.”<sup>82</sup> It is important to think of these activities always and already part of what it means to dwell.

So it becomes deviant to construct something without having in mind what it is that we are building for and how it fits into the world within which we must dwell. However, to construct something with dwelling in mind is in effect a way to reveal the reality within which we dwell. For example, Heidegger describes how an “old bridge in Heidelberg” reveals the landscape and nestles into the environment in a way that differs from building without care or concern for our dwelling place, which results in buildings simply being plopped into the landscape, standing out as alien structures, and disorienting us in our lives.<sup>83</sup>

Building without regard for one’s larger context is morally problematic when these buildings begin to orient our lives for us. The point can be seen as socially problematic when we consider the way in which it is analogous to our work lives. Those who have professions in which their duties are so removed from the way in which they impact others’ lives and the world can be easily disenchanted with their jobs. They work inside of closed systems that don’t have a visible relation to the larger context within which their whole life plays out. In contrast, those who have jobs that are intimately connected with the effect of their work, such as the work of a nurse, can have a work-life that *adds* to the sense of fulfillment in their lives beyond merely providing the needed financial or material means for survival.

Corey Sifter’s life was once oriented in a way analogous to that of a nurse. During Bonwiller’s campaign, Corey met “the most famous political writer...and the best one, too,” *New York Times* reporter G.V. Trawbridge, the man who eventually revealed the truth of Bonwiller’s extra-marital affair and his possible connection to JoEllen Charney’s death.<sup>84</sup> Trawbridge won the Pulitzer Prize for his reporting during the

Bonwiller campaign. But Corey realized the significance of becoming a reporter in something beyond merely his admiration for Trawbridge as an excellent journalist. Trawbridge is described as physically weak; he suffered from a deformity he had had from birth and from multiple sclerosis. One day during a rainstorm, he slipped and fell into a swale filled with mud. Corey eventually finds him stuck there helplessly and unsuccessfully struggling to free himself. Corey lifts him up and brings him inside. Given Trawbridge's physical condition, Corey rescued him from a situation in which Trawbridge, without the help of someone else, could have perished. It is here, during this rescue, that Corey understood and felt the significance associated with being a journalist:

And yet somehow, I also think back on this moment as one of the essential turns of my life, that the shame of holding the great man in such a state transmitted a kind of duty and honor to me also, and that it committed me in my own far slighter way to follow his path. And although it might sound far-fetched, I believe that something passed between the two of us in these moments, some acknowledgment of station and consequence and human obligation that is impossible to explain but that still has hold of me today.”<sup>85</sup>

This noble pursuit that so clearly has a background of significance defined by the importance of a position of revealing the truth through the practice of journalism was eventually thrown off its tracks by the culture at large. We are told that Corey's best-selling issue in recent years was one that covered the success of a local football player climbing in the ranks of the sport.<sup>86</sup> The paper is no longer the sentinel for the people it was when Corey was a child. Of course this detracts from the meaningfulness of Corey's work and adds to the way he ultimately reflects upon the nature of contemporary life.

Since we have less control over the quality of our work lives, we must begin to address the concerns of orientation in our lives outside of work. Corey can't force the world to be interested in real matters of concern or to demand that his town show an interest in a newspaper written by fellow residents rather than stock news written for the entire nation by a handful of national papers. But he can address the structure and content of his life outside of work.

Orientation for our individual lives must always begin with where we currently are. Corey states, at the end of the novel, that "now that my wife is so busy, and our own girls have gone their way in the world, these hours with my father are among the most lovely of my week. That's what it comes down to, I guess. We still like to walk in those hills, especially when it's warm, and sometimes now we just stand in them."<sup>87</sup> For Corey, happiness comes from the time he spends with his father in the hills of the nature preserve. But it is a relatively disengaged happiness driven by a sense of fatalism. We have the image of Corey no longer asserting his position as a person of the world. He seems to be attempting to take on the role of the trees that he admires as he just stands in the hills. This can be related to his claims that "a wistful melancholy is a rather pleasant way to spend an afternoon,"<sup>88</sup> and that "the thought of a glass of wine with my wife on our back patio, where on most afternoons we can watch our downhill neighbor sweeping the deck around his swimming pool is sufficient to get me through a day."<sup>89</sup> Although none of these suggestions for how a day should be spent are reprehensible, they reflect the disengaged passivity associated with the consumer who seeks *only* "conventional comfort, ease, and plentitude."<sup>90</sup> His attitude or disposition would be less worrisome if it didn't seem to be governed by a sense of fatalism or defeat characterized by the notion

that he is powerless when it comes to the structure and content of his life. But that is exactly how it seems when Corey suggests that “our lives are not at all what they appear... All of us, no matter how difficult this may be to accept, are merely marking a course set early in our days.”<sup>91</sup> Although this disposition may accurately respond to how Corey might feel about the events of his past that he no longer does have any adequate control over, they do not suggest a way of dealing with them now or living the rest of his life. Importantly, feeling powerless and being powerless are not the same. Here a sentiment is confused for a fact. Instead of rejecting the nature of his being (a person from a specific place and time with a unique history), which is a form of disorientation, Corey could attempt to reorient himself to a meaningful endeavor through a certain practical engagement. If he can no longer find fulfillment in his work or his family, then he could turn to the trees that he loves, just in a different way than he does at the end of the novel.<sup>92</sup>

Instead of becoming the tree, he could find a way to engage with the tree by reviving a practice that comes from outside of the culture dominated by instrumental reason. We can begin to discover how he could do this by following Heidegger’s cue. Heidegger says that cultivation and construction are the ways in which we build as dwelling. A little clearer, cultivation and construction are the ways we can practically engage with and in the world as dwelling, and they are appropriate and meaningful when we bear in mind the fact that we are dwelling in a time not of our choosing. Instead of an attitude of mimesis, Corey could have the attitude of cultivation and care towards trees; he could follow the lead of Mr. Metarey who attended to the bark of his oak trees each year.<sup>93</sup> This is the richest way humans, with their particularities and capacities can be

oriented in the world. From this we can find a sense of position in the world: a position that we are not powerless in but attendant to and empowered by.

I must concretize this notion. Corey is from upstate New York. This part of the world is unique for many reasons. One of these reasons is that from the sugar maple trees of this region of North America sap can be harvested to make maple syrup.<sup>94</sup> By incorporating the practice of cultivation in the form of attending to maple trees to make maple syrup, Corey can re-engage with the world in a way that gives him a role in its order. But as Heidegger warns, we can't think of cultivation (making maple syrup) as a task that is separate from our dwelling (or our lives as a whole) that can be justified by some notion of instrumental value. Since this is a practice that was first adopted from the Native American culture, it has its roots in a way of thinking that differs from the way of thinking that dominates our contemporary culture.<sup>95</sup> The survival of the practice, similar to the way Native Americans made maple syrup over 500 years ago, attests to some power or purpose wrapped up in the practice and left untouchable by instrumental reason.<sup>96</sup>

I must add that some do attempt to justify why practical engagements of this sort are incorporated into our lives with instrumental reasons. Robert Swain, in an interesting narrative where the scientific is woven into the practical engagements of gardening, does exactly this.<sup>97</sup> His discussion attempts to justify the time and resources he spends on making syrup by calculating the net energy output of the process. It fails to provide a positive output of energy and in turn Swain fails to find, in instrumental reason, a justification for his practice. But if we examine his train of thought, we can attempt to

extract a noninstrumental reason for his engagement that we could apply to Corey's life and our lives:

I am searching for a reason to make maple syrup. Years ago when I made it for the first time (a pint too dark to see through), I was motivated by curiosity. But now I want an explanation for my continued interest in boiling sap, an explanation strong enough to explain why I spend eighteen hours at a stretch outdoors, my knees cooked, my beard singed, my feet freezing. The few gallons of sticky-sweet amber syrup scarcely seem adequate compensation for the long hours. This search for justification is as time-consuming as the syrup making. Tentative justifications appear on the horizon, get mulled over, and are shared with friends who drop by to watch the sap boil. In recent years these have ranged from the metaphysical "It's magic" to the economic "It's cheap." Today it no longer seems like magic, and one visitor pointed out that even if I sold my entire year's production I would still be earning only thirty-five cents an hour...<sup>98</sup>

Later, Swain concludes,

Somewhere there is the ultimate justification for making maple syrup. The season for making it comes after the winter's energy crisis and before the spring's time crisis. It is late enough in winter now not to have to worry about having enough fuel to get through, and early enough in the spring not to have to spend all one's time readying the garden. In this season the snow is soft and the sun seems warmer. Tending the fire and watching the sap boil may just be an excuse to be outdoors, and that may be the only justification. But until the buds swell and the sap turns cloudy, I intend to go on making maple syrup...<sup>99</sup>

I believe Swain says a lot for the justification of making maple syrup, none of which he seems to be able to validate (even to himself) as a justification. The “ultimate justification” for making maple syrup for people like Swain, Corey Sifter, and anyone who has the opportunity to be an amateur maple syrup producer is a moral justification. Our culture isn’t very amenable to such justifications, but they are real and necessary and shouldn’t get brushed off as nostalgia.

These practices add richness and color to our lives. They provide the content that is missing in the framework established by the Rawlsian conception of justice. And they give us a perspective on the forces that tend to sweep us away in contemporary culture, instead of suggesting that the practice itself could somehow replace the structure imposed by the culture as the Taylorian frameworks are supposed to do. This perspective is an orientation. Through it we can compare what the practice has to offer in contrast to the fulfillment, enrichment, and sense of orientation that the culture in general offers. I have begun to draw the comparison in the examples taken from *America America*. What remains to be shown is how a practice enriches our life without being a calling to turn our backs on society or rejecting technology outright. This can be done by speaking for a practice that ties us to the world beyond the world of consumption, beyond merely instrumental practices, and beyond ease and efficiency without fulfillment or meaning.

The practice of making maple syrup is related to a thing, the maple tree and the forest it is a part of, and, as Heidegger suggests, a thing “gathers things in their belonging together.” Consider what happens to Swain while he is making syrup: “Tentative justifications appear on the horizon, get mulled over, and are shared with friends who drop by to watch the sap boil.” A justification for the activity is given, unknowingly, in



that very sentence. The practice gathers friends to be with one another in a celebration of the season, the savor of the syrup, and the joy of conversation.

Other dimensions, depths, and colors that this practice can add to our lives can be found as testimony in Swain's words. He experiences the world in a way that no one else can unless they too engage in this practice. Here the particularities are the source of richness and depth and his narrative is a signpost pointing in their direction and speaking for them. First, he mentions that the result of his first syrup production was "a pint too dark to see through." This implies that he was once a novice and that as the seasons have passed he has gained experience and skill and his batches of syrup have improved, and he now, not only recognizes that syrup comes in different grades based on its transparency, but he is also able to work the process such that he can produce lighter, higher quality syrup.

Making syrup each season isn't just repeating what was done last year; it is coming in contact with the world once again through an engagement that employs skills such as strength, attentiveness, endurance. All of these skills require nurturing and guidance. The soil that will allow such skill to come to fruition is continued experience. And the fruit of such an engagement is accomplishment in the manner of engagement – not accomplishment solely with respect to the end result. Further, to us who have never engaged in making maple syrup, 'sap' and 'syrup' are mere concepts to which we supply some vague understanding on the basis of our past experiences. But Swain is able to give a depth to these concepts through his experience with their particularity. Consider the following description: "sticky-sweet amber syrup." In this brief phrase we have three of our senses at work giving depth and dimension to a single concept. The description

stems from intimate experience and knowledge of acquaintance and is good in itself. This is one of the results and justifications for practical engagements such as making maple syrup. It is an achievement in familiarity, not innovation. Practices breeding familiarity, as a footing upon which the good life is to be built, offer a depth to our lives that is the opposite of the uniformity and superficiality of pleasures offered by a consumer culture.

The curiosity that Swain mentions as the first impulse to start making maple syrup is the attitude of openness to be informed, but also the openness to be captivated. Brushing up against the mysteries of the world, revealing their causes and conjecturing about their meaning, is a noble practice and good in itself. Endless and random curiosity, though, can be debilitating. With the practice of maple syrup production there is a closed system enveloped by the mystery of possibility and the diversity of contingency. Our curiosity towards how sap is extracted, boiled, and filtered to become syrup can be satiated in theory, but its practical setting affords a bottomless wealth of the experience that I am arguing is morally important. This type of practice and setting “keeps the mind amused and in spirits; by its exercise and regularity, it conduces to give vigor and health to the body.”<sup>100</sup> This is what makes practical engagement morally necessary, even when descriptive knowledge claims to have tapped the wealth available in such a practice. In our culture, we no longer pursue engagements that seem mysterious to us. When we are at home in front of the television and then invited to go into the woods, it seems boring and a hassle and pointless. We assume science has an answer to anything we are curious about, and we assume that technology has fulfilled any practical role necessary to a given process or phenomenon particular to our dwelling. This assumption is correct most of the

time, but it doesn't replace or strip practical engagement's moral power or importance. Once we get up from the couch and go out into the woods, we return reanimated, confident, and hopeful. It is odd that we would think that an engagement is not worthy of our participation since it has been described by science or given a technological replacement. These things only heighten the experience we can have with a practical engagement that employs our skills of awareness, understanding, physical agility and endurance. Science reveals different dimensions of what is happening before our eyes without exhausting the phenomena or our experience of them.

Swain continues to make maple syrup without justification. He claims that its "metaphysical 'magic'" is gone. But that magic isn't gone; it is just covered over. His instrumental mind, in its pursuit of a justification for making syrup, fails to relax and be open again the way it was the first time he made syrup. This is difficult for most of us. But I don't believe it is the necessary path of practical engagement; I don't think that all practical engagement starts off magical and ends up being unfulfilling or boring. I think this is why Swain continues to make syrup. He isn't futilely searching for the experience he had when he first made syrup; the practice of making syrup always presents the conditions of possibility for us to be re-animated and filled with hope or awe about our condition, and he keeps returning to the "outdoors" to be next to it. To be sure, our ability to meet that possibility is not always there. There is a cognitive-emotional or psychological element that plays a fickle role in all our endeavors.

One thing that helps us understand the importance of the psychological or cognitive element related to practical engagements is the comparison Heidegger makes between those who are currently physically next to a thing (the bridge in Heidelberg) but

miss its power and those who are contemplating it and have a different perspective on it. Speaking to those who are listening to his lecture far from the Heidelberg bridge, Heidegger says, “From this spot right here, we are there at the bridge...from right here we may even be much nearer to that bridge and to what it makes room for than someone who uses it daily as an indifferent river crossing.”<sup>101</sup> I think the reflective component grasps the more inclusive role building has with respect to our dwelling. Technology, with its ability to conceal its power source and contextual relations, makes it difficult for us to contextualize anything. Our capacity to cognitively contextualize something concrete is this reflective moment where we discover a realm between the concrete and the abstract. It is our capacity to cognitively contextualize something concrete. Within our minds the bridge need not be a concept standing on its own in abstract space; in our minds the bridge can be seen to tie us to different sides of the river that we need to get to in order to successfully dwell, and the bridge is captured as a part of a whole in relation to our dwelling and in turn can be constructed as such - likewise with the cultivation of sugar maples. The justification for letting the trees stand and engaging with them in our particularly human way is that such a practice is part of the inclusive whole that is dwelling and because of this making syrup is a meaningful, significant activity. As a way of life, pretending to be a tree (symbolic of Corey’s fatalism) or, worse, destroying the tree for no reason other than to replace it with a representation that strips it of any of its involvement character (the main impulse of contemporary culture), fails to find a rich way to connect itself as a practical engagement related to either our dwelling or the exercise of our capacities.

When we think of how the maple tree and making maple syrup is related to our lives we can reflect, in a flash, on the unity of dwelling. This flash reveals us as particular, embodied beings connected to a particular world that we are dependent upon. We see that what allows for maple syrup is a specific type of tree, that even though this tree can be found in or transplanted to different parts of the world, only in the northeast of North America are the cool nights and warm days just right to make the sap flow. We see that in the march of human history the cultural knowledge of this practice has survived and can be passed down, even between cultures, and if it isn't, we fail to allow for "maple...to sweeten the cup of life."<sup>102</sup>

In the flash of reflection we see a family living on piece of land, tapping the trees, boiling sap, bottling syrup, preparing a breakfast, sitting down at the table where all of the conditions that have made the syrup possible have been gathered into an amber liquid that is to be consumed to provide sustenance and possibly joy. Speaking of the taste of maple syrup John Burroughs writes, "It has a wild delicacy of flavor that no other sweet can match. What you smell in freshly cut maple-wood, or taste in the blossom of the tree, is in it. It is then, indeed, the distilled essence of the tree."<sup>103</sup> Encompassing more than just the trees in the importance of the taste of maple sugar, Native Americans rejected the use of West Indian cane sugar because maple sugar "tastes more fragrant – more of the forest."<sup>104</sup> To illuminate our moral ties and dependency upon the forests for the food it provides, we need to taste something other than what sits directly and conveniently in front of us. We rather need to taste that which sits right in front of us *and* is directly tied to an entire world and so deepens and broadens our experience with the specific engagement of eating in our lives.

The mishaps and successes of a year's harvest can enliven the conversation at the breakfast table; they can be laughed about and boasted about and act as a way of gathering and centering the family or community that participated in the harvest. The arrival of the spring's greenness can mean more than a new calendar page and a change of content in the mindless chatter about weather. It can stand as a temporal marker that paces out our lives in terms of the seasons and connect us to the natural rhythms of the year. We can say, "The buds are on the trees. Another year is awakening. Making maple syrup has ended for another year. The syrup we have made will sweeten our mornings and our loved ones' mornings for the year to come. It will nourish me, and its fragrance and color will bring to mind the earth, trees, fire, and friends that made it possible. I can be grateful for this." To be grateful is to affirm one's life, and to affirm one's life is to deem it meaningful.

Thoreau says that "There is little or nothing to be remembered written on the subject of getting an honest living. Neither the New Testament nor Poor Richard speaks to our condition. I cannot think of a single page which entertains, much less answers, the questions which I put to myself on the subject. How to make the getting of our living poetic! For if it is not poetic, it is not life but death that we get."<sup>105</sup> Responding to Thoreau, Helen and Scott Nearing write that, "Sugaring can bring one an honest living. And anyone who has ever sugared remembers the poesy of it to the end of his days. When the time of year comes around with sap rising and snow melting, there is an insistent urge to take one's part in the process – to tap the trees, to gather the sap, to boil out the sweet syrup of the maple."<sup>106</sup>

We can't follow Helen and Scott and retreat into the woods of Vermont. We must take responsibility for our nation and our world by supporting and fighting for justice and environmental protection and playing a role in the fabric of society. If we were to go create our own community, it would only stand as an idol in relation to the society at large, tempting those who seek that way of life towards it. But upon reflection we know that it is not a feasible or responsible option. Instead, we should attempt to incorporate some practice that, to some degree, introduces that which can provide "poesy" to our lives and allow it to center our lives and act as the thing we orient the other aspects of our lives to and from which they unfold.

## **Section Two.** *Structure and Poesy in the Lives of Americans*

Instead of proposing a radically new way in which individuals should structure their lives which would require at least some minor political revolution, I am proposing that we work from where we are and attempt to highlight and center our lives on that which is most important. If the majority of people's lives in America are structured around the five-day work week, of which each day is broken up into three meals, work, leisure, and sleep, where can poesy, engagement, and the eloquence of reality enter? To speak in the most general way possible and without making any assumptions about the content of the majority of our lives, I am going to discuss how we can incorporate these elements into our lives through the preparation of food. Although the practice of making maple syrup could be incorporated into the structure of Corey's life, it can only be taken up with by a tiny fraction of Americans. However, the less geographically specialized

practice of food preparation that is discussed in Robert Farrar Capon's *The Supper of the Lamb* can be worked into the philosophical framework that I employed in describing the practice of making maple syrup and can be applied to most anyone.<sup>107</sup>

The thrust of my argument is that things provide orientation in our lives. These things "gather things in their belonging together." When we find an appropriate way to incorporate a natural thing into the way in which we live or into what it means to dwell, it imports the eloquence of reality, and our engagement with it and any context it bespeaks, animates us and gives us the sense that we have done the best we can. Things need people to speak for them if they are hidden or lost under the current of a way of life that ignores them. In our society narratives can stand as testimony from people encountering things through familiarity.

The natural ingredients in the food we prepare are always potentially gathering things. Capon speaks for the onion. He begins: "The onion is a *thing*, a being, just as you are. The two of you sit here in mutual confrontation. Together with knife, board, table and chair, you are the constituents of a *place* in the highest sense of the word. This is a *Session*, a meeting, a society of things."<sup>108</sup> Capon uses the word *session* to emphasize the importance of an event related to or centered on a thing and embedded in a practice. Next, he emphasizes a sense of Heideggerian orientation: "The uniqueness, the *placiness*, of places derives not from abstractions like location, but from confrontations like man-onion."<sup>109</sup> Capon goes beyond concretizing the notion of orientation. He adds content, referring to things related to practices that are part of our living. Capon suggests that we look onto the onion as if we had never seen one before.<sup>110</sup> He wants us to be open to the mystery and contingency each individual onion possesses. If we are open, there is



a bottomless depth of reality in front of us to fill us up. Capon's description of an onion is illuminating and new without being innovative: "an onion is not a sphere in repose. It is a linear thing, a bloom of vectors thrusting upward from base to tip...See it as the paradigm of life that it - as one member of the vast living, gravity-defying troop that, across the face of the earth, moves light and airward as long as the world lasts...

*Structurally*, the onion is not a ball, but a nested set of finger within fingers, each thrust up from the base through the center of the one before it. The outer digits are indeed swollen to roundness by the pressure of the inner, but their sphericity is incidental to the linear motion of flame intrusting flame."<sup>111</sup> The description doesn't end there but that is enough for the reader to catch the enthusiasm Capon has for the onion and the depth and dimension with which such a simple thing can be revealed to us. There is an element of poesy and eloquence in his speech.

Capon attributes the source of this eloquence, not to his sheer wit or creative power, but to the onion itself. He suggests that the onion can whisper to him, and to us, if we are open to it.<sup>112</sup> I point this out simply to show that the nature of things is translated to us *from them*, not from us projecting *upon them*. More precisely: "Every time [man] diagrams something [or abstracts from something] instead of looking at it, every time he regards, not what a thing *is* but what it can be made to *mean* to him...reality slips away from him and he is left with nothing but the oldest monstrosity in the world: an idol."<sup>113</sup> Making the distinction between the depth and eloquence of the thing versus the abstract space projected by technological devices, Capon concludes: "One real thing is closer to God than all the diagrams in the world."<sup>114</sup>

Letting these things into our home or lives is the first step. Recognizing them and paying attention to them or listening to them is the next. Third, we must figure out a way to respond to them. The practice attached to the onion is the preparation of a meal with it. Engaging our at first untutored skills with simple recipes, we can make the meals we prepare more challenging, more diverse, with no limit once the depth of an onion begins to reveal itself to us through our attentiveness to it. Our sense of taste and smell will be honed as well as our experience in the art of cooking, and a sense of accomplishment can be taken from the meals we will eventually learn to make.

Finally, there is the event where the meal can be a cause for celebration marked by gratefulness for the people it is shared with and the earth that has provided it.

The practice of preparing food and making maple syrup could help Corey orient his life. It seems meager compared with the meaning that's offered to those involved in great historical events like becoming president or winning a key battle in a war. But when attempting to make the meaning of these great historical figures' lives intelligible, we must ask, "Why be a courageous politician or a noble soldier?" and in doing so we are asking "What are you securing or attempting to secure for all?" If our answer to this question is left contentless, we risk expending our energy in the form of strutting and fretting. The questions must be dealt with all at once. Recalling Rawls' division of what is right and what is good, we must respond that they must come as a unity. Rawls' theory lacks the content that makes freedom and equality worth attaining beyond mere equal survival. Without someone speaking for the practices that can import the experiences I have drawn from various narratives into our lives, our culture will simply march forward with the illusion that our lives can be whatever we want them to be and miss the fact that

the opportunities for meaningful and significant lives are evaporating. Narratives that speak for certain practices and things can be the signposts pointing the way. Philosophers who can take these practices and articulate how they fit into what it means to live a significant life can be the guardians of the importance of such practices.

The practice of making syrup and preparing food can be related to learning to play a musical instrument. It is undeniable that there is a poesy and eloquence to music. To think that we would replace our musical instruments with technologies that eliminate our role in the discovery and creation of music is almost preposterous.<sup>115</sup> It is a category mistake to think that there can be innovative progress with respect to the violin the way that innovative progress is revered in relation to devices that have functionally similar instantiations, but are structurally completely different.<sup>116</sup>

Our role in practices that are less artistic need not deviate from the norm set in place by what it is to truly play music. Making practices easier or more efficient begins to strip them of the significance they can offer by making our engagement with them insignificant. Speaking for the practice of making maple sugar, one author avoids the indefensible notion of nostalgia with the defensible notion of preciousness and poesy to combat instrumental reason. He or she writes: “There is a human and poetic quality in maples, which is easily felt, and though the land would be worth more for its lumber than for its sugar, many farmers would no more part with their maple bush or orchard than with any precious heirloom.”<sup>117</sup> Allowing the tangible conditions of significance to remain and then practicing engaging activities that are affiliated with the “poetic quality” of these things, while avoiding burdensome toil or nostalgia, is a principle we can employ when considering the practices we adopt to center our lives.

Extending the analogy of daily-life practices with music, the musician can become highly skilled and accomplish mastering difficult pieces of music. Similarly, but not identically, an amateur sugar maker can become familiar with his forest and basic tools and hone his skill as well. The same is true for the house cook. But the musician can also perform a piece of music for a group of people and all can experience the poesy and eloquence that constitutes the music and during this experience one can say to oneself, “This makes me feel that life is a miracle. I wish everyone could be here and experience this.” The same is true about the gratefulness one feels at the breakfast table after a harvest of maple sugar or after a meal has been prepared. These events and practices invoke a response and furnish a content *for which* it is worth being free and equal.

Finally, orientation is found by incorporating a thing and a practice into our daily lives. From this orientation we get a perspective on our other tasks, our work, our relationships, and our plan-of-life. Our lives cannot be immediately restructured and traded for a life related to one thing and one practice. We are simply to see what it is that a thing and a practice can offer that our usual experiences do not. From that we can hope that our lives can unfold in a way that they become centered upon things and practices. And finally, we can speak for, defend, and point others towards that which we are most grateful for, and in doing so we can appropriately attend to the space left open for the good life as political justice is realized.

<sup>1</sup> See Albert Borgmann's *Holding on to Reality*, (Chicago, 1999), 78-80, for a description of the early advances in portable clocks used for determining one's longitude while at sea

<sup>2</sup> For a brief history of this movement see Barbara Czarniawska, *Narratives in Social Science Research* (Sage Publications, 2004), Chapter 1.

<sup>3</sup> Jerome Bruner, *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), pg. 9.

<sup>4</sup> Henry James, *The Art of Fiction Major Stories & Essays*. (New York, 1999), 574.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 575.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 574.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 574-575.

<sup>8</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Was heisst: Sich Im Denken orientieren?*, (1786) in "The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant: Religion and Rational Theology", edited by Allen W. Wood (1996), pgs. 7-18.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 9.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 9.

<sup>12</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, (1926). Translated by John Macquarrie & Edward Robinson ( San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1962). All cited pages will be in reference to "the later German editions" pagination. Pg. 109.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> From lectures given by Professor Albert Borgmann in Spring 2008.

<sup>15</sup> Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 112.

<sup>16</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Art and Space*, "Man and World," Vol. 6, 1973, pgs. 3-8. Translated by Charles H. Seibert. Pg. 4.

<sup>17</sup> Here, I am referring mainly to Adorno and Horkheimer, especially in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and *One-Dimensional Man*.

<sup>18</sup> Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics*, 1097b, 5-15. In discussing the self-sufficiency of happiness, Aristotle writes: "Now what we count as self-sufficient is not what suffices for a solitary person by himself, living an isolated life, but what suffices also for parents, children, wife and in general for friends and fellow-citizens, since a human being is a naturally political animal." Quoted from *Aristotle: Introductory Readings*. Translated by Terence Irwin and Gail Fine (Hackett, 1996), pgs. 204-205.

<sup>19</sup> John Rawls, *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement* (Harvard University Press, 2001). In all citations I will cite the page number of the quote or paraphrase, not the aphorism number.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 140-141.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 141.

<sup>26</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Was heisst: Sic him Denken orientiren?*, 12.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 13.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 12.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, footnote on page 12.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 12.

<sup>31</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Harvard University Press, 1989), pgs. 30-31.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>37</sup> For a more complete list of what should not factor into our understanding of equality among persons, see John Rawls, *Justice as Fairness*, pg. 15-16.

<sup>38</sup> Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, pg. 3.

<sup>39</sup> Ethan Canin, *America America*, (New York, 2008), 374.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 375.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 183.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 101.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 116-117.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, 203-205.

<sup>45</sup> Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, (Harvard, 1991), 55 and 14.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 28.

<sup>47</sup> *America America*, 356. This slogan appears on a young man's shirt that was slow in responding to the alarm bells in Corey's father's retirement home.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid*, 222. See the following exchange on page:

Corey: "I guess I thought you always took your own path. In everything."

"God, Mr. Sifter," she [Trieste] said, "why would you think that?" And although the same enigmatic smile teased her lips, I realized she wasn't kidding at all.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid*, 297-298.

<sup>50</sup> *Ethics of A.*, 37.

<sup>51</sup> *America America*, 325.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid*, 74.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*, 402.

<sup>54</sup> "Arbeit Macht Frei," was first a novel written by German nationalist Lorenz Diefenbach. Later, the slogan was adopted by the Nazi party and used as an inscription above labor and concentration camps during the holocaust. See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arbeit\\_macht\\_frei](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arbeit_macht_frei). Accessed 11/16/09.

<sup>55</sup> *America America*, 253.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid*, 289.

<sup>57</sup> Corey seems to put a twist on this explanation on *ibid.* pages 417-418. But this only highlights that we have to deal with the historical hands we are dealt which come in the form of specific (perhaps damaged) psychologies and (perhaps unbearable) inheritances. Of course they can be unfair and crushing. Imagine what kind of world any offspring of Adolf Hitler would have had to taken up with.

<sup>58</sup> For an excellent list of the attributes of importance related to Liam see *ibid.* 417 last full paragraph. The added suggestion that the "poles of grandiosity and despair had come loose from their yoking" implies that his emotional life was as uncharacteristic as his great kindness, skill, and intelligence.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid*, 164.

<sup>60</sup> *Ethics of A.*, 5.

<sup>61</sup> *America America*, 165.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid*, 166.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid*, 168.

<sup>64</sup> *Ethics of A.*, 82.

<sup>65</sup> *America America*, 202-203.

<sup>66</sup> Wendell Berry, *Life is a Miracle*, (Counterpoint, 2000), 95.

<sup>67</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Art and Space*, 5.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid*, 6.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid*, 8.

<sup>71</sup> *America America*, 8.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid*, 373.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid*, 374.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid*, 223.

<sup>75</sup> Wendell Berry, *Life is a Miracle*, 142.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid*, 42.

<sup>77</sup> Ethan Canin, *America America*, page 40-41.

<sup>78</sup> Martin Heidegger, *The Thing, Poetry, Language, Thought*, (Harper and Row, New York, 1971), trans. Albert Hofstadter, pages 165-186.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid*, 181.

<sup>80</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Building, Dwelling, Thinking, Basic Writings*, (HarperCollins, 1993), edited by David Farrell Krell, 347-363.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid*, 349.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid*, 350.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid*, 354-355.

<sup>84</sup> *America America*, 108-109, 358-359.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid*, 305.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid*, 240-241.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid*, 458.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid*, 37.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid*, 156.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid*, 402.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid, 458.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid, 364.

<sup>94</sup> New York state produced 2.7 % of the world's supply of maple syrup in 2003. See Janet Eagleson & Rosemary Hasner, *The Maple Syrup Book* (Boston Mill Press, 2006), 29. See also, Helen and Scott Nearing, *The Maple Sugar Book* (Schocken Books, 1950), 132-134, for an explanation of the conditions necessary for maple sap to run and the geographic region that provides these conditions. The Nearing's book is the best book on maple syrup that I have read.

<sup>95</sup> See, Nearing's *Maple Sugar Book*, Chapter Two.

<sup>96</sup> My point here is not that instrumental reason cannot or has not affected the practice of making maple syrup. It has. Large outfits that produce hundreds of thousands of gallons of syrup each spring use the most efficient and advanced methods and technologies. But still, there is a practice alive and celebrated today amongst amateur maple syrup makers that is almost identical to the improved methods of the early colonists who learned how to make syrup directly from the Native Americans and whose methods have improved the practice by making it sustainable. See Chapter Three of *The Maple Sugar Book*.

<sup>97</sup> Robert Swain, *Earthly Pleasures: Tales from a Biologists Garden*, (Lyons and Burford, 1978), Chapter One.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid, 4-5.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid, 13-14.

<sup>100</sup> Nearing, *Maple Sugar Book*, 235.

<sup>101</sup> Heidegger, *BDT*, 358-359.

<sup>102</sup> Nearing, *The Maple Sugar Book*, 246.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid, 4.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid, 38.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid xii-xiii. The Nearing's quote Thoreau on these pages and the quote comes from Henry David Thoreau's Journal, February 18, 1850.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Robert Farrar Capon, *The Supper of the Lamb: A Culinary Reflection*, (Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1969).

<sup>108</sup> Ibid, 11.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid, 12.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid, 12, 14.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid, 15.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid, 20.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid, 21.

<sup>115</sup> I say "almost" preposterous because manufactured music and the synthesizer have an enormous presence in our culture and are rarely distinguished as something other than being part of what is considered a musical performance. The difference between music emanating from a synthesizer and the music emanating from an actual violin is the same difference I attempted to draw in Chapter One between finding one's way using landmarks and signs as opposed to a GPS. The great reliance upon the technological framework that supports the alternative way of orienting oneself opens the door to arbitrary orientation and ultimately disorients us. It is similar with music coming from technological devices. When we listen to someone compose a score with a computer program for a synthesizer, we walk away from the experience thinking, "I guess I could do that. I just have to sit down and follow the instruction for the program." But at that point how can we be claiming to be playing music? It differs when we stand in a room and a friend who is a skilled violinist, and she plays a piece she has mastered. We see that only through practice and learning *with the instrument* could we ever do what that person does.

<sup>116</sup> To clarify, the television set once had a cathode tube in it to project the image we see on the screen. Today, there are multiple technologies that provide the same function (image on a screen) but are not related structurally. Liquid crystal display (LCD) screens employ a completely different technological structure to produce an image.

<sup>117</sup> Nearing, *The Maple Sugar Book*, 70. This passage is quoted from an anonymous author whose essay, "*The Green Mountains in Sugar Time*," was published in *Harpers*, April, 1881.